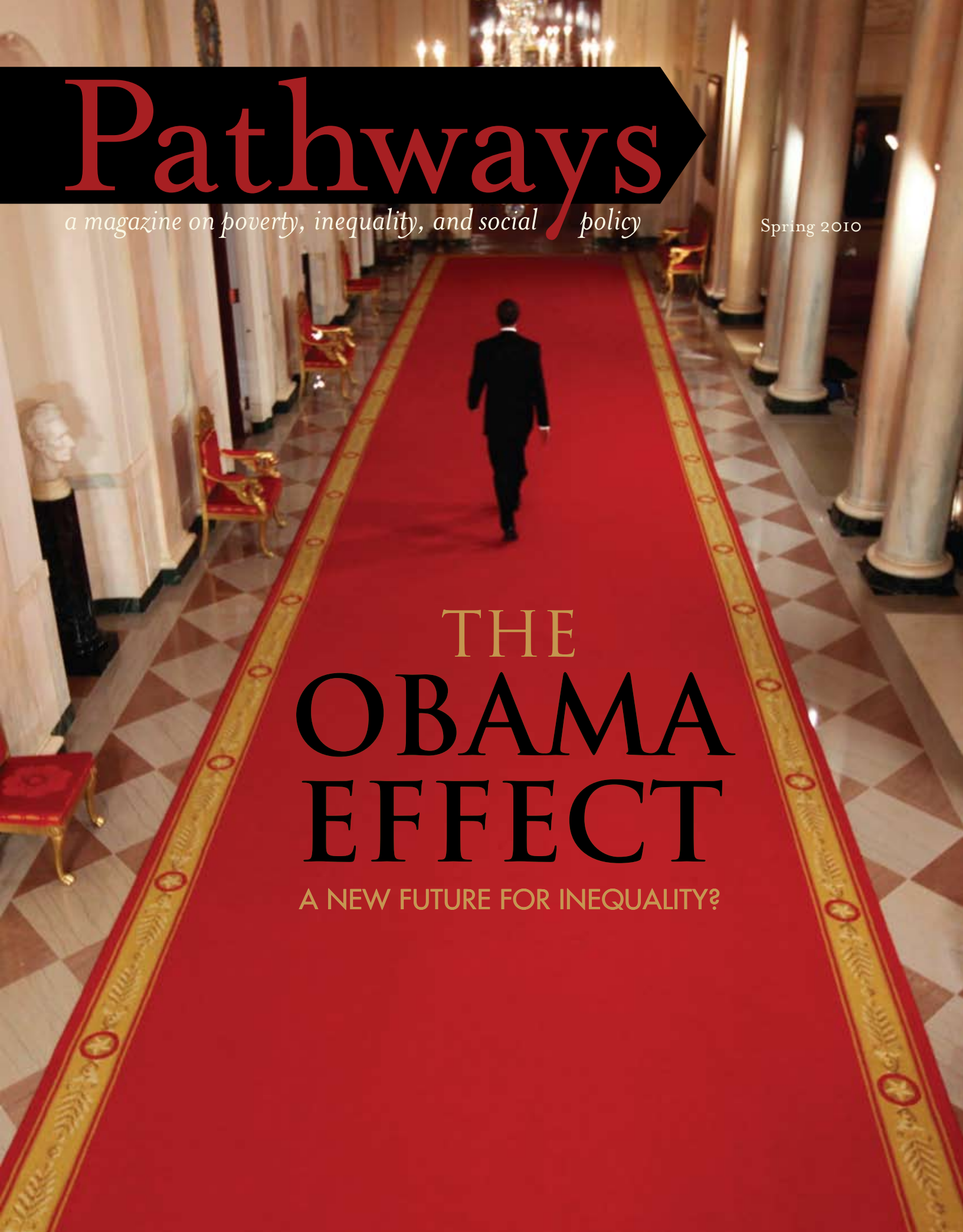

Pathways

a magazine on poverty, inequality, and social policy

Spring 2010

THE OBAMA EFFECT

A NEW FUTURE FOR INEQUALITY?

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Editors' Note

A mere 18 months ago, the inaugural issue of *Pathways* was released with three presidential hopefuls on the cover, each contributing a piece detailing how a new war on poverty might be waged. In her evaluation of their respective platforms, Rebecca Blank (now the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs) pronounced Obama's the "most creative in putting new policy ideas on the table." As is frequently noted, election-year assessments of this sort saddled President Obama with unusually high expectations for change, perhaps most obviously in the poverty and inequality arena. Not surprisingly, there have been immediate pronouncements of failure, a sentiment most famously captured in Sarah Palin's rallying cry, "How's that hopey, changey stuff working out for ya?"

We've dedicated this issue of *Pathways* to a considered assessment of how President Obama is living up to his commitment to address issues of poverty and inequality in the United States. Has he indeed set the stage for fundamental change in the structure of poverty and inequality? Or have other priorities and events, such as the Great Recession, induced him to move this commitment to the background?

In taking on this question, it goes without saying that a Johnson-style "War on Poverty" is not underway, and accordingly any evaluation of the Obama agenda will hinge on whether one allows that a bureaucratic, submerged, even artful response can in the end make enough headway. Does a new official poverty statistic really matter all that much? Will female workers be assisted in any fundamental way by simply expanding the statute of limitations on employment discrimination claims? Can a new Middle Class Task Force really affect the lives of American families? Because poverty and inequality issues are now addressed on so many fronts, and because new policy may be rolled out in seemingly minor bureaucratic pronouncements, a credible evaluation can no longer be completed via some armchair analysis by a casually informed generalist. For better or worse, the experts have to be called in, and they have to be asked to drill deep into the details of the first term.

We have done just that. We've recruited some of the most distinguished experts in the country on income, race, gender, and LGBT inequality and asked them to take careful stock of President Obama's first year. The answers, as anticipated, often hinge on the importance accorded to the bold, sweeping, charismatic program as opposed to the more bureaucratic, legalistic, seemingly incrementalist maneuver. In the lead essay, Jennifer Hochschild concedes that Obama has been governing so far as a "cautious, somewhat-damped-down centrist" on inequality issues, but she allows that he might well reclaim the swagger of his campaign rhetoric and become the charismatic reformer, even in the face of the conventional wisdom that the recent Massachusetts election requires a tack to the center. Similarly, Joan Williams and Stephanie Bornstein lay out the incrementalist case for appreciating Obama's contributions to gender equality, and, like Hochschild, they can also see a pathway to more transformative change in coming years. In contrast, Lawrence Bobo suggests that Obama is *already* playing a grand reformer role on matters of racial and income inequality, at least more so than many progressive critics have appreciated. Lastly, Patrick Egan offers a frank assessment of the President's disappointing first year on LGBT issues, in this case an arena in which even an incrementalist story is evidently hard to muster.

How does it all add up? Don't look for any grand assessment here! We stand by our lead suggestion that the devil is very much in the details, that any global assessment will surely mislead, and that ours is a complicated President who defies, almost as a matter of principle, the glib summary.

—David Grusky & Christopher Wimer, Senior Editors

The Income Rollercoaster

RISING INCOME VOLATILITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

BY KAREN DYNAN

Millions of U.S. households have suffered devastating income disruptions as a result of the recent economic downturn. As of late 2009, eight million jobs had been lost to the recession, and one in ten workers was out of work, putting the unemployment rate at its highest level since the early 1980s. Although a variety of indicators suggest that the recession is now over, most analysts foresee a slow and gradual economic recovery and consequently a long, uphill climb back to full employment. Thus, it may be a number of years before the incomes of many families are back to normal. Policymakers have already taken some steps to support these families and stimulate job creation, and they continue to deliberate about what additional steps are still needed.

These short-term swings in income have occurred against a backdrop of equally notable long-term trends. A growing literature has explored longer-term trends in household income fluctuations, and although not every study agrees, many suggest that U.S. households have seen a significant rise in income volatility over the past several decades. For the most part, this increase occurred even as the volatility of aggregate economic activity appeared to be moderating. That is, while households have had to deal with increasing year-to-year flux in the amount of income available to them, the total value of U.S. economic activity has, since the early 1980s, been showing less year-to-year variation than in earlier times (even including the recent recession).

In this article, I document the increase in income volatility among U.S. households. I then discuss how these results square with macroeconomic trends and explore the implications of rising volatility for family well-being, particularly in the context of other important long-run changes in family finances.

The Evolution of Household Income Volatility

My results are based on the 1968 through 2005 waves of the Panel Study on Income Dynamics (PSID), which has tracked the income, employment, and characteristics of a representative sample of U.S. households since the late 1960s. The current sample is an amalgam of the original families, their descendants, and families that have been added over time in order to maintain the representativeness of the survey. The data are generally viewed as very high quality, and with several decades of information now available to analyze, the survey has been and continues to be widely used by researchers examining socioeconomic trends.

The PSID is particularly useful for studying trends in U.S. household income volatility because it provides information about income at the family level. Sources that mainly track the earnings of individual workers—such as Social Security records—can yield key insights about trends in labor market dynamics. However, results about the volatility of individual earnings may not be indicative of trends at the household level because of changes over time in family structure (including the

presence and role of second earners) and in nonlabor income.

Based on my recent work with Doug Elmendorf and Dan Sichel, I define income volatility as the standard deviation across households of the percent change in household income between two periods. If every household's income grows at the same steady rate, then measured volatility will be zero. However, if changes in household income are all over the map—with some households seeing huge gains while at the same time others face big losses—this measure of volatility will be very large.[1] I put few restrictions on the sample. Importantly, I include income changes that result from changes in the male or female heads of household because events like divorce and the death of a spouse clearly can have significant implications for the economic security of a household. However, I exclude households headed by students or retirees, as transitions in and out of these states are often expected and intentional.[2]

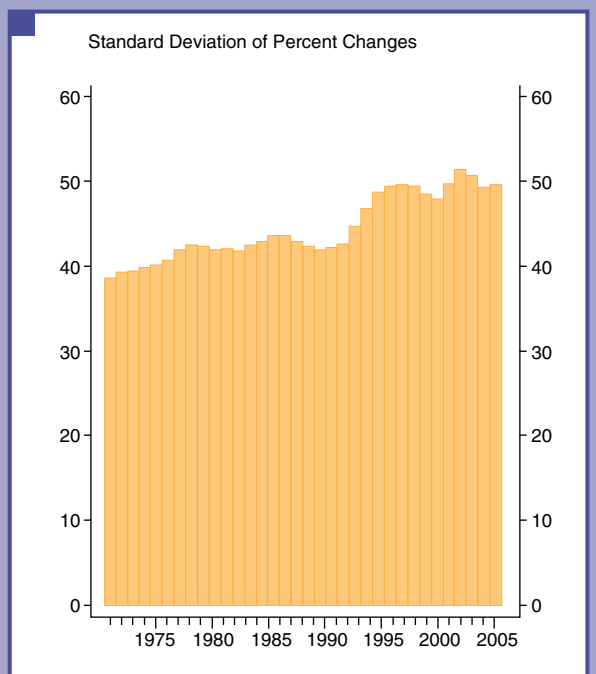
Figure 1 shows the evolution of household income volatility over time. As can be seen, the standard deviation of the percent change in household income trended up in the 1970s, stabilized a bit in the 1980s, but then turned up again after 1990. All told, household income volatility increased by about one-third between the late 1960s and the middle part of this decade.

The increase in volatility has largely resulted from an increase in the frequency of large household income changes. The solid orange line in Figure 2 shows the fraction of households experiencing a drop in income of 50 percent or more, and the dashed blue line shows the same for increases in income. The shaded areas represent recessions (as dated by the National Bureau of Economic Research); as expected, large income declines tend to go up during such periods, and large increases tend to go down. One can also see that the prevalence of large income increases was particularly high during the late 1990s when macroeconomic conditions were booming.

The figure shows a decided uptrend in the frequency of large drops in income, with about 7 percent of households experiencing declines in income of 50 percent or more in the late 1960s and 12 percent experiencing such drops in the middle part of the 2000s. The share of households seeing a 50 percent or more increase in income rose from about 8 percent to 10 percent over the period. Consistent with these results, my recent work with Doug Elmendorf and Dan Sichel finds that much of the increase in income volatility over time disappears if the largest income changes are removed from the sample. If we ignore very large changes, there is only a 10 percent rise in volatility over the last 40 years.[3]

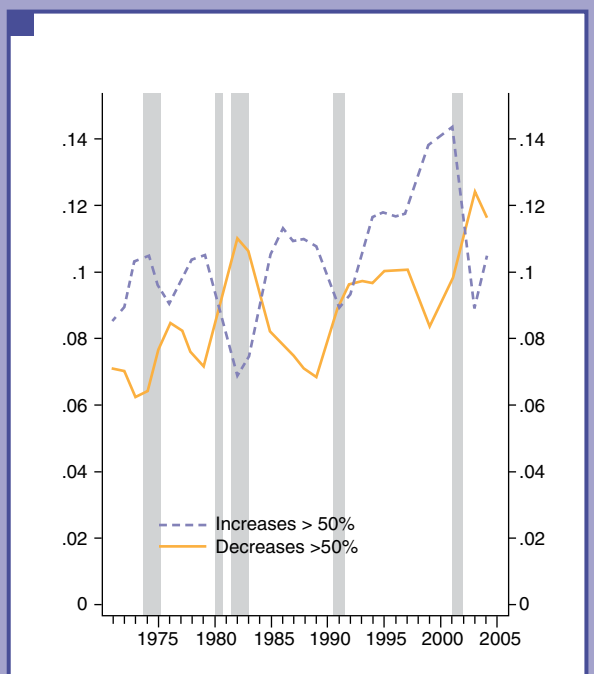
Many other studies of trends in household income volatility over time find increased volatility since the early 1970s. For example, recent papers by Scott Winship in 2009, Austin Nichols and Seth Zimmerman in 2008, and Elisabeth Jacobs and Jacob Hacker, also in 2008, all find increases in the income volatility of PSID households, albeit with some disagreement on the magnitude of the change. Likewise, papers by Tom Hertz in 2006 and by Neil Bania and Laura Leete in 2007 find increases between the early 1990s and early 2000s using the Current Population Survey and Survey on Income and Program Participation (SIPP), respectively. Not all studies, however, have revealed an increase in volatility. Most prominently, a 2008 paper by Molly Dahl, Thomas DeLeire, and Jonathan Schwabish found little evidence

FIGURE 1. Volatility of Household Income



Source: Panel Study on Income Dynamics; 3-year moving averages of 2-year percent changes

FIGURE 2. Frequency of Large Increases and Decreases in Household Income



Source: Panel Study on Income Dynamics; 3-year moving averages of 2-year percent changes; shaded areas denote recessions

of a trend in the frequency of large household income changes in a data set combining information from the SIPP with information about the household head's earnings from the Social Security Administration. Although the bulk of the evidence suggests that the increase in household income volatility is real, determining why some studies reach a different conclusion represents an important direction for future research.

What About Macroeconomic Trends?

The foregoing trends pertain to income volatility at the household level. We can also calculate income volatility at the macroeconomic level by comparing the flux in aggregate economic activity over different time periods. When we do so, we find that the rise in household income volatility occurred at the same time that aggregate economic activity stabilized. A wide range of macroeconomic indicators show considerably less volatility over the two decades beginning in the mid-1980s than over preceding decades. As can be seen in the first two columns of Table 1, the standard deviation of growth in real GDP fell from 4.4 percentage points between 1960 and the mid-1980s to 2.1 percentage points between the mid-1980s and the mid-2000s—a decline of about 50 percent. The volatility of employment growth fell from 2.5 to 1.4 percentage points, and that of real disposable personal income growth fell from 3.9 to 3.2 percentage points.[4] This stabilization of aggregate activity—now termed the Great Moderation—occurred in other countries as well and spawned numerous papers that sought to explain it in terms of milder economic shocks, better monetary policy, improved inventory management, and financial innovation. The events of the past couple years have, of course, presented a serious challenge to the view that a Great Moderation has occurred. Yet, as shown in the third column of Table 1, post-1985 aggregate GDP volatility is still 44 percent lower than in the preceding quarter century even if recent data are included in the calculation.

Macroeconomic volatility can decline even as household-level income volatility rises if the covariance of income shocks across households decreases. Plainly put, households can be suffering more significant income disruptions, but if such shocks become less synchronized across households, then aggregate volatility need not rise and may even decline. Indeed, this is what my colleagues Doug Elmendorf, Dan Sichel, and I found in the PSID in 2006. The combination of larger (but more idiosyncratic) individual shocks is consistent with the popular view that the U.S. economy has become more dynamic in recent decades. Many commentators have pointed to globalization, deregulation, and rapid technological change as increasing the amount of "creative destruction" in the economy, as well as the competitive pressures bearing down on workers and firms.

Implications for Economic Security

The rise in household income volatility would warrant little concern if it primarily reflected changes in income that were under the control of households. For the calculations above, I excluded some households (students and retirees) whose changes in income may be intentional. However, there are other groups that are harder to exclude, such as households that are making voluntary changes to their hours in order to accommodate changing dependent care needs. If employers or social mores have allowed for more such adjustments over time, the resulting greater volatility of income may partly reflect choices that leave households better off than they were previously.

TABLE 1. Volatility of Macroeconomic Indicators

	1960–1984	1985–2006	1985–present
Real GDP	4.4	2.1	2.5
Real Disposable Personal Income	3.9	3.2	3.4
Employment	2.5	1.4	1.8

Note: Standard deviation of annualized quarterly percent change.

However, evidence from my recent work with Elmendorf and Sichel suggests that such voluntary choices are not the dominant force behind increasing household income volatility. We present a decomposition of the increase in earnings volatility for household heads that shows that the volatility of earnings per hour has increased much more than the volatility of hours worked. The former is presumably much less likely to be voluntary, given that workers rarely choose to cut back their hourly compensation rate.

A second consideration that bears on the interpretation of growing household income volatility is the degree to which it has translated into corresponding variability in spending. Because consumption is more directly related to well-being than is income, we care especially about trends in consumption volatility. Advances in credit markets over the past few decades have made it easier for households to obtain credit cards and to access accumulated home equity through lines of credit and cash-out refinancing transactions (at least until the recent financial crisis). One might therefore expect that households have become increasingly able to borrow to sustain consumption in the face of disruptions to income. This view is supported by an analysis I conducted with Elmendorf and Sichel in 2005; my coauthors and I found that the propensity to consume out of current income has fallen substantially over time and that the sensitivity of aggregate consumption to unusual declines in aggregate income has fallen much more than that for unusual increases. One implication of these findings is that the increase in household income volatility may not have fully translated into a corresponding rise in consumption volatility. In other words, Americans appear to have been better able to maintain consumption levels in the face of large swings in income. It remains to be seen, however, whether the recent financial crisis will permanently change the availability of credit in a way that undoes the (relative) stability of household consumption.

The Big Picture

The rise in household income volatility is only one of many trends that have important implications for the economic security of households. In a recent paper in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, I highlight several notable developments in households' financial environment. Most prominently, the long-run increase in the supply of credit, while enhancing households' ability to smooth their consumption over time, has exposed households to more risk in other ways. For example, households have taken on much more debt over the past couple of decades, and as a result, they have to meet much higher debt service obligations. Data from the Survey of Consumer Finances suggest that, for the typical household, the ratio of debt service obligations to income rose from 5 percent of income in 1983 to 10 percent in 1995 and 13 percent in 2007. Higher debt obligations are associated with a higher probability of becoming delinquent on debt, which can impair future access to credit, and ultimately, lead to a loss of any property securing debt.

Greater access to credit has also enhanced households' ability to "leverage up" to purchase homes. The ratio of home purchase price to income for the median homebuyer rose from 1½ in 1983 to 2¾ in 2007. This increase was even more pronounced for households in the lowest third of the income distribution, where the ratio rose from 3 in 1983 to nearly 6 in 2007. The tremendous risk associated with purchasing more expensive homes has been vividly illustrated by the damage to household balance sheets caused by the recent collapse in home prices. In the aggregate, housing wealth fell from a peak of 6¼ times income in 2007 to less than 5 times income in 2009. According to real estate information firm First American CoreLogic, one-quarter of mortgage borrowers had mortgage balances as of late 2009 exceeding the values of their homes. The recent financial crisis has also shown that enhanced access to credit not only endangers those households that choose to take on large amounts of debt but may also subject the economy as a whole to more risk if households' excessive leverage produces an unsustainable bubble in asset prices.

Household financial opportunities have expanded in other important ways. For example, the past several decades have seen the development of new products and services that have made it easier for households to invest in stocks. In addition, structural changes in our pension system have produced a shift away from defined benefit pensions and toward defined contribution pensions, which has given households much more control over the amount and allocation of their retirement savings. These developments have yielded important benefits—they have allowed households to choose to take more risks in pursuit of higher expected future well-being. However, as with the greater availability of credit, the downside is that these choices will not always work out as hoped. The degree to which regulators should limit these choices is subject to debate, but researchers and policymakers are beginning to grapple with increasing evidence that the risk of confusion and mistakes is particularly high for newer, more complex financial products.

Conclusion

Household income volatility appears to have trended significantly upward over the past several decades, with much of the rise tied to an increase in the frequency of very large changes in income. Volatility of earnings per hour has risen more sharply than the volatility of hours, suggesting an important involuntary component to the increase in income variability. Expanded access to credit has probably mitigated the degree to which income declines translate into consumption declines, but this development has posed other risks to household economic security, as have other trends in household financial opportunities.

It is too early to know what effects the current economic crisis will have on these trends. The high current degree of weakness in labor markets—together with the expectation that the economic recovery will proceed only slowly—implies that household income volatility may be unusually elevated for several years to come.

Karen Dynan is Robert S. Kerr Senior Fellow and Vice President for Economic Studies at The Brookings Institution, as well as a former staff member at the Federal Reserve Board of Governors and the White House Council of Economic Advisers. *The author would like to thank Howard Lempel for excellent research assistance and comments.*

NOTES

1. Average income over the two periods is used in the base of the percent change, as it yields changes that are symmetric with respect to increases and decreases and that are naturally bounded between 200 percent and -200 percent. In particular, we define the percent change as $100*(Y_t-Y_{t-2})/Y_{average}$, where $Y_{average}$ equals $(Y_t+Y_{t-2})/2$. The change is measured over two years because the PSID switched to biennial surveying in the late 1990s. Other studies have captured income volatility in more complicated ways, such as methods that isolate the permanent and transitory components of income, as pioneered by Peter Gottschalk and Robert Moffitt in an influential 1994 paper. Such methods lack the transparency and flexibility of that used here, but represent a useful complement.

2. A description of other aspects of sample and data construction are available upon request, including how I deal with top-coding and what appear to be some technical breaks in the data. None of the restrictions imposed here change the qualitative results. For example, including households headed by retirees generally raises the level of volatility (consistent with transitions in and out of retirement generating large changes in household income), but one still finds a significant uptrend in volatility over time.

3. Specifically, we removed the top 25 percent of increases and the bottom 25 percent of decreases to do this calculation.

4. The smaller proportional decline in the volatility of aggregate real disposable income growth relative to the volatility of GDP growth is largely attributable to short-term variability in wage disbursements. For example, quarterly volatility in wages was boosted in the early 1990s by a shifting of bonus payments in anticipation of tax-rate increases. In addition, short-lived countercyclical changes in tax collection—such as tax rebates—have continued to boost the quarterly variability of real disposable income growth.

Can Nest Eggs be Launch Pads?

The venerable concept of a "cycle of poverty" is coming back because there's indeed much transmission of poverty from one generation to the next. The results are stark; if, for example, you're so unlucky as to be born into a poor family in the United States, you have a 42 percent chance of remaining poor as you move into adulthood. Is there any way to break this cycle and promote economic mobility?

According to new research from the Pew Economic Mobility Project, savings may provide an important pathway for escape. Using data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Pew researchers found that 71 percent of children born to high-saving, low-income parents achieved mobility out of the bottom of the income distribution, whereas only 50 percent of children born to low-saving, low-income parents broke out. The same result holds for adults within their own lifetimes. That is, poor adults with high initial savings had a 55 percent chance of escaping the bottom of the income distribution, but poor adults with low initial savings had only a 34 percent chance of escaping. It follows that savings may be a powerful ticket out.

The policy prescription is likewise straightforward: We should reward and encourage savings among the poor. As the Pew Foundation research team points out, contemporary policy unfortunately takes precisely the opposite tack. It's not just that tax incentives and government savings vehicles are only rarely geared to low-income families. Additionally, and perhaps even more problematically, some public assistance programs actively discourage savings through asset limit rules. If savings is a means of breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty, we need to refashion policy that exploits this result to good effect rather than bad.

Reid Cramer, Rourke O'Brien, Daniel Cooper, and Maria Luengo-Prado. 2009. "A Penny Saved Is Mobility Earned: Advancing Economic Mobility Through Savings." Washington, D.C.: The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Do Mommy and Daddy Have Jobs Yet?

The steady drumbeat of bad labor market news might be understood as mainly causing problems for adults and older teenagers who are searching for work or worrying about losing their jobs. The official unemployment rate is of course calculated as the proportion of adults over age 16 who have been looking for work in the past four weeks. But is unemployment indeed primarily an adult problem? Or are many children suffering as well because Great Recession unemployment has hit parents disproportionately hard?

According to new estimates from the Brookings Institution's Julia Isaacs, it's indeed the parents who have been hardest hit. She finds that one in seven children, or approximately 14 percent, are now living with an unemployed parent (using December 2009 measurements). This compares to an overall unemployment rate in the same month of 7.4 percent for adults aged 18–64. Almost half of unemployed women are parents, and approximately one-third of unemployed men are parents. Worse still, teenagers and young adults, those aged 16–24, are suffering extraordinarily high unemployment rates, adding to the number of youth experiencing hard times. These results are troubling because parental unemployment leads to poverty, to poor health and academic outcomes for children, and to increased stress and abuse within the home. The Great Recession picture is therefore disturbingly clear: The kids are not all right.

Julia B. Isaacs. 2010. "Families of the Recession: Unemployed Parents & Their Children." Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution. Available at: http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2010/0114_families_recession_isaacs.aspx

The Center Folds

It's sometimes argued that, because of deindustrialization and globalization, the middle of the U.S. class structure has been hollowed out, and middle class workers have lost out. Is this conventional account on the mark? Exactly what types of jobs are increasingly available in the new economy? What types are contracting? And which workers are getting the good jobs in our new economy? We have until now lacked basic research on such questions.

Enter economists David Autor and David Dorn. They report that there's indeed been a substantial contraction in middle-skill jobs involving routine tasks and formal training. There's also growth, however, in the number of nonroutine jobs at the two tails of the income distribution; that is, not only are high-skill jobs that involve problem-solving, abstract reasoning, and advanced decision-making becoming increasingly available, but so too are low-skill jobs that demand little in the way of formal training.

So who's getting the good jobs at the upper tail of the distribution? It turns out that young workers with high levels of education are dominating the high-skill nonroutine jobs that are rapidly being created in the new economy. Older workers, even if they're educated, are increasingly segregated into the fading routine middle-skill sector or the low-skilled nonroutine sector. The ticket, then, to good jobs in the new economy is not just education alone. It's just not enough to be educated; one now has to be young, too. If you're old, you're more likely to find yourself plain out of luck.

David Autor and David Dorn. 2009. "This Job is 'Getting Old': Measuring Changes in Job Opportunities using Occupational Age Structure." *American Economic Review Papers and Proceedings*, 99(2), 45–51.

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

The Black-White gap in education, income, and occupational outcomes has of course closed dramatically over the last half century. Although we know that ever more African Americans are entering privileged managerial and executive positions, we don't know whether they can reliably hold on to such positions once having secured them. Are successful African Americans firmly ensconced in the upper reaches of the labor market? Or are they more likely than Whites to slide down after scaling the heights?

According to new research by George Wilson and Vincent J. Roscigno, African Americans are especially vulnerable to backsliding. Using long-term data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Wilson and Riscigno find that Blacks in elite occupations are more likely than Whites in elite occupations to be downwardly mobile in their early career. This Black-White gap in rates of downward mobility is especially pronounced in the private sector. By contrast, the public sector, which has historically been more receptive to integration, proves again to be something of a safe haven, one that allows African Americans to hold on to their elite positions for longer. The simple conclusion: For African Americans in the private sector, it's very much a case of two steps forward, one step back.

George Wilson and Vincent J. Roscigno. 2010. "Race and Downward Mobility from Privileged Occupations: African American/White Dynamics Across the Early Work-Career." *Social Science Research*, 39(1), 67–77.

A Yawning Gap

As the 24/7 economy continues to spread and take hold, a rising number of workers are being asked to work evenings, nights, weekends, and rotating shifts. These "nonstandard work schedules," which are especially prominent among low-income workers, can be difficult to reconcile with family responsibilities. If the children and spouses of such nonstandard workers are operating on a standard daytime schedule, the result may be a "burn the candle at both ends" lifestyle in which sleep is compromised. Although the candle-burning lifestyle is clearly increasing in frequency, we don't know too much about that lifestyle and, in particular, who is participating in it. Are, for example, men or women losing more sleep because of nonstandard work schedules?

According to new research by David J. Maume, Rachel A. Sebastian, and Anthony R. Bardo, the preliminary answer is that women are the main sufferers here. Drawing on a survey of 583 retail food workers who were working nonstandard schedules, the authors found that women experienced significantly more sleep disruptions than did men. Although underlying health differences between men and women accounted for some of this difference, the more important reason why women suffer from disrupted sleep is that they tend to be responsible for caregiving. The simple implication: If you have to combine a nonstandard work schedule with caregiving, the only way to get by is to steal from sleep. And hence a new "yawning gap" is emerging right beside the more famous gap in pay.

David J. Maume, Rachel A. Sebastian, and Anthony R. Bardo. 2009. "Gender Differences in Sleep Disruption among Retail Food Workers." *American Sociological Review,* 74(6), 989-1007.

Of Frogs and Ponds

The new fashion is to desegregate schools on the basis of socioeconomic standing rather than race. That is, just as race-based school desegregation plans are falling out of favor, many schools and school districts are turning to socioeconomic desegregation in hopes of achieving a diverse student body. The expectation is that such desegregation will not only make our schools more diverse but will also equalize academic achievement between low-income and high-income students. What's unclear, however, is whether this standard expectation is being realized. It's possible that the evidence will indeed show that income-based achievement gaps are smaller when low-income and high-income students are brought together in the same school. Alternatively, low-income students in high-income schools might suffer from the so-called frog-pond effect, a lowering of their achievement that arises because they are stigmatized in the high-income schools or lose out in the face of stiffer competition.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, sociologist Robert Crosnoe provides new evidence on this question. His study examines (a) whether the achievement gains of low-income students are enhanced or reduced when they attend schools with more high-income students; (b) whether such achievement gains, if they are found at all, are less prominent for low-income students who are also minorities; and (c) whether low-income and minority students are less likely to enroll in advanced courses. The results reveal a dishearteningly consistent frog-pond effect: Low-income students, especially those who are African American and Latino, show smaller academic gains in high-income schools than in low-income schools.

According to Crosnoe, these results might mean that between-school segregation has now been converted into a new form of within-school segregation, a form that may even be more damaging than the old form. The achievement benefits potentially derived from socioeconomic integration might, in other words, be undermined because low-income students in high-income schools remain socially and academically isolated and unable to compete for resources. If this account is on the mark, it implies that socioeconomic integration at the between-school level isn't enough and that one needs additionally to equalize resources and activities (e.g., advanced courses) within integrated schools.

Robert C. Crosnoe. 2009. "Low-Income Students and the Socioeconomic Composition of Public High Schools." *American Sociological Review,* 74(5), 709-730.

Fits and Starts?

Obama and the Transformation of American Inequality

BY JENNIFER L. HOCHSCHILD

Barack Obama campaigned for the presidency as a charismatic liberal reformer, whereas now he is governing as a cautious, somewhat-damped-down centrist. That, at any rate, is becoming the conventional wisdom; my first sentence paraphrases a recent column by Anna Quindlen in *Newsweek* magazine. It seems to me to be largely correct, with the crucial caveat that the long run may look quite different from both the short and medium run. That is, many of the Obama administration's current policy positions with regard to issues of economic inequality are relatively conservative compared to his campaign rhetoric. But if certain underlying dynamics come into play in a way that permits or pushes Obama into developing policies that fit his campaign persona, then his administration might have a broad and deep impact on American inequality.

A custodian dusts and vacuums prior to President Barack Obama's Tax Deliquency Memorandum signing ceremony in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building of the White House, Jan. 20, 2010. OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY CHUCK KENNEDY

As a senator and presidential candidate, Obama positioned himself on the economic, though not the racial, left. He wrote in *The Audacity of Hope* that "what ails working- and middle-class blacks is not fundamentally different from what ails their white counterparts: downsizing, outsourcing automation, wage stagnation, the dismantling of employer-based health care and pension plans, and schools that fail to teach young people the skills they need to compete in a global economy" (p. 245). His solutions ran down the same list:

> What would help minority workers are the same things that would help white workers: the opportunity to earn a living wage, the education and training that lead to such jobs, labor laws and tax laws that restore some balance to the distribution of the nation's wealth, and health care, child care, and retirement systems that working people can count on (p. 245).

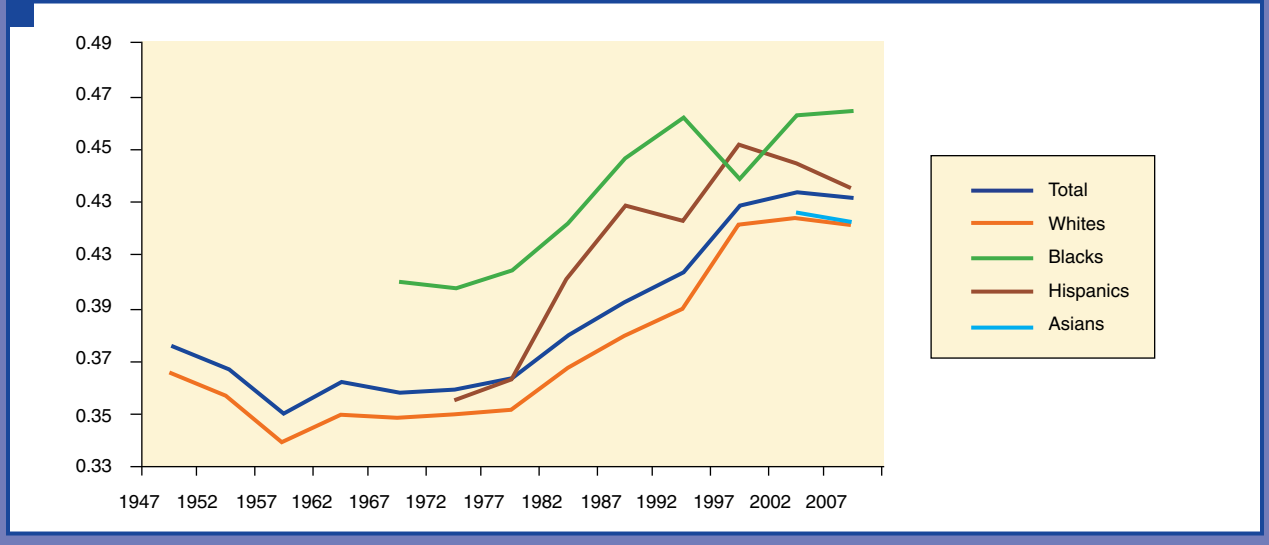
Senator Obama was the sixteenth most liberal senator in 2005 according to the *National Journal*, and his ranking rose to the tenth most liberal in 2006. Obama received 100 percent ratings or an "A" grade in 2006 from six major liberal advocacy groups, and an 8 percent or lower rating from three major conservative groups. As a presidential candidate, he wrote in *Pathways* that "what we can do as a nation is ensure that every American who wants to work is prepared to work, able to find a job, and able to stay out of poverty. What we can do is make our neighborhoods whole again. What we can do is retire the phrase 'working poor' in our time." He followed this general statement with a set of specific policy proposals, ranging from expanding the Harlem Children's Zone model to providing more funds to EITC and the Community Development Block Grant Program. Rebecca Blank concluded that Obama's proposals were more focused on helping disadvantaged communities than were those of John Edwards and Hillary Clinton, the other leading Democratic presidential contenders at the time.

Liberal advocates were generally delighted with Obama's stance as a candidate and new president. The editors of *The Nation*, Robert Borosage and Katrina vanden Huevel, wrote ecstatically in June 2009 that "all the stars are aligned for launching the greatest era of progressive reform since the 1960s. We face stark crises that require fundamental structural reform. We have a powerful, popular president with a mandate for change—and a majority of Americans yearning for it. Catastrophes have left conservative ideas discredited…Both houses of Congress enjoy…arguably the most liberal caucuses in four decades." Just as Borosage and Vanden Heuval anticipated, Obama's administration began with a flurry of proposals to reform social and economic policies—most centrally in health care and health insurance, but also in job creation, redistributive tax policy, encouragement of labor union organizing, and elsewhere. Yet, as of this writing, only a few of his smaller policy proposals have been enacted, with the largest and most visible proposals not (yet?) law. Whether they ever will become law, especially given the recent special election of Republican Scott Brown to the Massachusetts Senate seat, is the question of the day.

Economic Inequality

There can be little doubt that Obama's concern with economic inequality is grounded in substantial economic changes (though whether one sees such changes as problematic varies, of course, with the reader's ideology). Income disparities have risen steadily over the past generation. The Gini index ranges from 0 (complete equality of all units, in this case families) to 1 (complete inequality of all units such that one family holds all of the

FIGURE 1. **Gini index for families, by race, 1947–2008**



Source: U.S. Census, http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/f04.html

TABLE 1. **Vote for Democratic presidential candidate,by family income**

	2000	2004	2008	Share of voting population
< $15,000	**57%**	**63%**	**73%**	6%
$15,000–$29,999	**54**	**57**	**60**	12
$30,000–$49,999	49	**50**	**55**	55
$50,000–$74,999	46	43	48	21
$75,000–$99,999	45	45	**51**	15
$100,000 +	43	41	49	26
200,000+	--	35	**52**	6

Majority support in boldface

Source: *New York Times* exit polls

nation's income). A rise of even a tenth of a percentage point in the Gini index is typically seen as a major shift. As Figure 1 shows, the Gini for all American families has risen from a low of .35 in 1960 to a high of .43 in the late 2000s. Each racial or ethnic group has followed roughly the same trajectory.

Wealth inequality is considerably greater than income inequality. In 1983, the richest 1 percent of Americans possessed 33.8 percent of all household wealth in the United States, according to NYU economist and premier wealth inequality scholar Edward N. Wolff. They went on to acquire 35 percent of all household wealth gains between then and 2004, ending up with 34.3 percent of household wealth. Conversely, in 1983, the poorest 40 percent of Americans held slightly less than 1 percent of the nation's wealth. And between 1983 and 2004 their situation went from bad to worse; they ended up with only 0.2 percent of the nation's wealth. Put another way, 15.5 percent of Americans had zero or negative net worth in 1983 (their debts were greater than their assets), whereas 17 percent were in the same dire situation twenty years later.

Increasing inequality, then, is clearly one of the most dramatic social developments of our time. The presence of a societal problem or phenomenon, however, will not necessarily generate a political response; people may believe that a distressing situation is their own fault, morally fair, or not amenable to governmental action. Nevertheless, a fairly rapid and powerful increase in income and wealth inequality among all racial and ethnic groups is a powerful background condition that we would expect to increase public support for Obama's anti-inequality proposals.

Public Opinion on Economic Inequality

Just as the presence of a societal problem does not necessarily generate a political response, so too is strong public support neither necessary nor sufficient for a dramatic policy shift. But having public opinion on one's side certainly helps persuade members of Congress, always mindful of their next election. Unfortunately for his campaign vows, Obama faces a distinctly mixed set of opinions among Americans with regard to economic inequality. On the one hand, voters who were on the losing end of the changing income and wealth distributions voted increasingly Democratic over the 2000s, especially in 2008. Table 1 shows this result; it also shows that even higher-income Americans became more supportive of Obama than of his Democratic predecessors.

Two (awkwardly worded) survey questions also show strong support for reducing economic inequality well into the new administration's first year in office. CBS and the *New York Times* asked in April 2009, "The Obama Administration has proposed increasing federal income taxes for households making more than $250,000 a year. Some of the money raised by these new taxes would be used to help improve access to healthcare and provide tax cuts for households making less money. Do you think this proposal is a good idea or a bad idea?" Three-quarters of respondents endorsed the proposal. The same survey asked, "Do you think the tax code should be changed so that middle- and lower-income people pay less in taxes than they do now and upper-income people pay more in taxes than they do now, or don't you think the tax code should be changed?" Two-thirds supported that idea.

On the other hand, an equally reputable array of surveys shows Americans to be increasingly wary of redistributive policies. The Gallup Poll has asked people since 1992 if "upper-income people pay too little federal taxes"; the proportion agreeing has declined from 77 percent in 1992 to 60 percent in 2009. That is still a solid majority, but no longer an overwhelming one. Similarly, Gallup has asked if "lower-income people pay too much federal taxes"; agreement in this case has declined from a solid majority of 57 percent in 1992 to a minority of only 39 percent in 2009. How to reconcile these two sets of views remains a puzzle, not only for analysts but also for the White House and Capitol Hill.

Policy Initiatives

The Obama administration's biggest domestic policy initiative so far, of course, is the push to reform health care and access

TABLE 2. Mean net worth, as % of overall mean

	Under 35	55–64	75 and over
1983	.21	1.67	1.05
1995	.16	1.81	1.32
2004	.14	1.91	1.19

Source: U.S. Census, http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/f04.html

to health insurance. To be sure, health care is only one of the many items listed in *The Audacity of Hope* or in Obama's *Pathways* essay as necessary to overcome poverty and unfair levels of inequality. But health expenditures are the proverbial elephant in the room—approaching one-fifth of gross domestic product and absorbing an ever-increasing share of wages and benefits for those lucky enough to have employer-provided insurance. And despite dramatic increases in health spending over the past few decades, close to one-sixth of Americans remain uninsured. If Obama and his supporters can even now achieve health care reform that moves the country in the direction of greater equity and efficiency, he will perhaps have the policy space and political capital to move further down his *Audacity* and *Pathways* lists of priorities.But obviously recent developments in Massachusetts make major health care reform a lower (if not low) probability outcome.

In the meantime, many of the administration's policy initiatives (or lack thereof) have come more from the cautious center than the liberal left. Providing almost bottomless pits of public funding for weak Wall Street firms and Detroit auto manufacturers, avoiding until recently (and still quite cautiously) direct engagement with "don't ask, don't tell" in the military, maintaining at least part of the base at Guantanamo, mostly refraining from seeking stringent regulation and oversight of the banking sector, opting against immediate engagement with immigration reform—these are all ways in which the Obama administration has disappointed many of its fervent supporters and postponed, if not set aside, its reformist and redistributive impulses.

Discontinuous Transformation?

A wise economist once told someone asking for an economic prediction that his rule of thumb was to "never give a number and a date at the same time." He then proceeded to make some sharp (and ultimately accurate) forecasts. In the spirit of looking ahead while avoiding predictions founded on conflicting evidence, let me suggest a framework for thinking about whether Obama will eventually succeed in promulgating policies to alleviate economic inequality.

Key to my argument is the concept of "discontinuous transformation." The idea, though not the phrase, emerges out of the political economist Albert Hirschman's book, *Shifting Involvements*. He asks what happens if "important private consumption experiences…leave…disappointment and frustration" in their wake rather than gratification. Perhaps the "disappointed consumer" will take up "a wholly *different* 'pursuit of happiness,' say, political action." Disappointed private consumers are more likely to become engaged public citizens, Hirschman continues, if the political context provides "the ready availability or appearance of a 'cause.'" Hirschman stops his chain of speculations at this point, however, since "here we are appealing to exogenous factors"—that is, to accidental occurrences outside the realm of economic modeling (pp. 63–64, emphasis added).

What to an economist is a distasteful exogenous factor is, to a political scientist, a fascinating electoral dynamic. Obama's election might turn out to be the "cause," in Hirschman's terms, that propels many Americans to shift from a private focus on wealth accumulation to a public focus on alleviating poverty, creating more equal opportunities, and reducing the gap between rich and poor. Certainly not all consumers are shifting into a public mode. And those who do shift have a wide variety of issues to choose from—war in Afghanistan, global warming, Guantanamo, "don't ask, don't tell," in addition to those that focus more directly on economic inequality. So any transformation of Americans' attention away from private acquisition and toward promotion of the public good will be discontinuous, that is partial, stuttering, nonlinear. But there could nonetheless be a real transformation—"change we can believe in."

Several forces that helped elect Obama promote the possibility of a transformation in Americans' attention, discontinuous though it may be. One such force is generational progression. As Table 2 shows, young adults have lost out in the run-up of wealth inequality since the 1980s. Those under age 35 held about a fifth of the nation's total net worth in 1983, but only a seventh by 2004. The more substantial gains in wealth went to those over age 55.

Young adults may not know these data, but their commitment to redistributive policies appears to be growing. An annual poll of approximately 260,000 first-year college students per year (across over 400 colleges and universities) provides good evidence on this point. When asked if "wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now" just over 50 percent agreed in the early 2000s, whereas 60 percent agreed in 2008 (Cooperative Institutional Research Program, UCLA). And a majority of white voters under age 30, unlike older whites, voted

for Obama in 2008. This is especially striking given that only 39 percent of whites under age 30 voted for the Democratic presidential candidate in 2000, and only 44 percent did so in 2004, according to *New York Times* exit polls. If young adults persist in their support for redistributive policies and liberal reformers as they move through adulthood, they could lead the country toward a more publicly oriented, and more liberal, direction over the next decades. That would indeed be a transformation compared with the past few decades.

The other force that could convert Obama's election into more public involvement and greater support for economic redistribution is reactions to the Great Recession. Americans remain not only unemployed and anxious, but also hostile to the wealthy firms and individuals who are plausibly the cause of their misery. In October 2009, seven out of ten Americans supported the federal government's limits on compensation for top executives in companies that received federal bailout funds; in another poll at about the same time, only two-fifths expressed even weak confidence that "financial institutions will change their business practices in a way that makes another financial crisis less likely." At least three times as many blame the Bush administration "for inadequate regulation of the financial industry" as blame the Obama administration "for not doing enough to turn the economy around."Before September 2008, up to half of Harvard graduates used to flock to Wall Street's investment banks; now many of those students' successors are applying to Teach for America or nonprofit organizations.

Even if young adults and job-losers are being transformed, changes in public opinion will remain discontinuous. Americans are not being radicalized. No one is marching in the streets and almost no one offers an anti-capitalist structural explanation of the rise in economic inequality or the recent crash. If anything, it is people on the other end of the spectrum, under the guise of a new Tea Party, who are doing the marching. Republican members of Congress vote with enviable party discipline against the health care bills, confident that they will not suffer electoral punishment. And twice as many Americans call themselves conservative as call themselves liberal; by mid-2009, conservatives outnumbered moderates for the first time since 2005, according to a recent Gallup Poll. Predictions of a backlash against Obama's initially ambitious agenda are easy to find and are arguably being borne out. In the same week that *The Nation* predicted "the greatest era of progressive reform since the 1960s," Matthew Continetti of *The Weekly Standard* asserted that "American voters have serious misgivings [about Obama's economic policies].... Those concerns likely will become even more pronounced.... The political party with a track record of opposition to government overreach, overspending, and overindebtedness...will benefit. It won't be the Democrats."

If I were forced, say by the kind editors of *Pathways,* to offer the political scientist's equivalent of a number and a date at the same time, I would nonetheless venture that the United States will halt and even reverse the rise in inequality that has defined the past few decades. Some sort of health care bill could still pass, which will help a nontrivial proportion of the uninsured or underinsured. Some sort of law regularizing the immigration status of the 12 million unauthorized residents of the United States may be enacted. Inner-city schools could become somewhat less abysmal under the pressure of this administration's Department of Education; a slightly smaller proportion of young black men will be incarcerated. Not everything will change, and perhaps most things will not change—that is why any transformation will be discontinuous. But Obama's own genius as a politician and rhetorician, Americans' anger at "Wall Street" and what it represents, the dramatic rise in economic inequality especially among the young and especially as regards wealth, and the possible political rejuvenation of leftist politics among young adults all make possible a genuine transformation—from private to public concerns, and from wealth accumulation for a few to the provision of opportunities for most. That was the platform on which Obama ran for and won office, and it may yet be the program that he begins to more forthrightly enact over the next few years.

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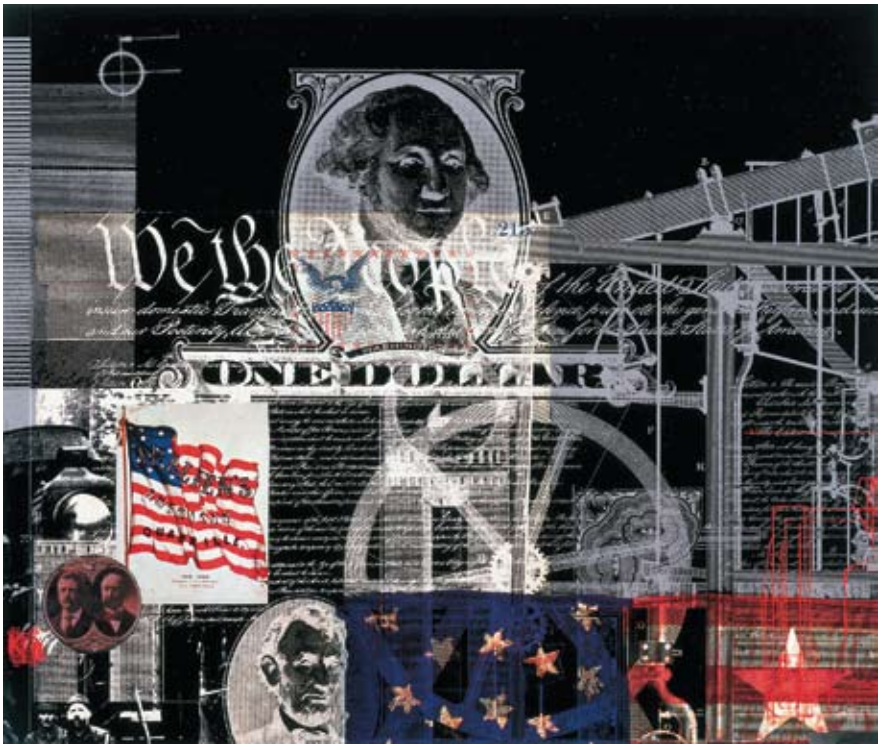

OBAMA AND THE GREAT PROGRESSIVE DISCONNECT

BY LAWRENCE D. BOBO

Barack Obama came to power as the candidate of hope, promising to bring change to America. Many individuals, causes, and groups tethered their political ambitions to the candidacy of the one-term senator from Illinois, now the forty-fourth—and first African American—president of the United States. Yet, as his first full year in office comes to a close, there are more and more signs of discontent on the left. Indeed, in some liberal quarters, there is rising doubt that Obama has proven to be, borrowing a phrase from the campaign, "the change we've been waiting for."

The critique from the left is as misplaced, self-indulgent, and politically naïve as the critique of Obama from the right has been intransigent, irrational, and corrosive of the democratic process. The attack from the right was more foreseeable and in that narrow sense is more excusable. The rumblings on the left, for me, are harder to fathom and thus need be viewed in context. This is particularly true when viewed through the lens of Obama's impact on racial and ethnic inequality—an area where Obama and his administration's policies present a stark break with the failures and inaction of the recent past.

Jan. 20, 2009. President-elect Barack Obama was about to walk out to take the oath of office. Backstage at the U.S. Capitol, he took one last look at his appearance in the mirror. OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY PETE SOUZA

Whither Change?

Obama did stir up high expectations for a new direction in Washington. It is certainly true that Obama's campaign for the presidency advanced an even more pointed critique of the Bush administration than did that of his one-time rival Hillary Rodham Clinton. In hindsight, it seems clear that taking the eight years of Bush leadership to task for a failure of "competence," as Clinton did, was hardly the message of outrage that many Democratic voters, desperate for more fundamental "change," wanted to hear.

Having captured both the Democratic nomination as well as the presidency with a message of hope and change, has Obama's first year done enough to deliver on the promises he seemed to make and the high expectations he so ardently fostered during the campaign season? For me, the answer is an unequivocal "Yes!" Indeed, I'm not just surprised by all the carping on the left, but bewildered and disappointed by it.

In arguing that Obama has (to the extent politically possible) delivered on high expectations, I well realize that, with the recent election of Scott Brown as the U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, the chances of major health care reform are now reduced. And there's no denying that, if health care reform doesn't happen, the first year loses at least some of its luster. But even if major health care reform doesn't happen, my argument is that the carping on the left strangely ignores all the successful initiatives on inequality-related issues that Obama has in one short year delivered. I begin, then, with an overview of his general poverty and inequality initiatives and then turn to his one-year legacy as it pertains to issues of race.

Let us begin at the beginning. The first piece of legislation signed by Obama, after hardly a week in office, was the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. This legislation, defeated by Republicans the year before, put back into place basic legal options and protections against pay discrimination faced by women and other workers. Although the third president to nominate a woman to the U.S. Supreme Court, Obama is the first to elevate a person of Hispanic ancestry, Sonia Sotomayor, to the nation's highest court. Both of these actions, in quite different ways, can be read as reducing patterns of inequality deeply etched in the American social fabric.

Another example is tax policy. In this regard, Obama has steadfastly maintained his intention to allow the Bush-era tax cuts for the wealthy to expire. It makes practical and political sense, as he proposed during the campaign, to largely maintain the reductions for "middle class Americans," in this instance defined as those earning less than $250,000 a year. Fortunately for those interested in a more progressive and inequality-reducing tax structure, the claim that high-end tax cuts yield broadly beneficial economic growth has looked especially dubious of late. There are good reasons to expect the Obama administration to continue to strive to deliver on this promise.

Other major actions by the Obama administration have had positive social effects as well. It is increasingly clear that the quick, massive, and unequivocal action of the Obama administration in response to the Great Recession probably averted a cataclysmic economic collapse. Although it is hard to sell voters on the virtues of something that didn't happen—a counterfactual—Obama's steadfast support for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (or the $800 billion stimulus package) helped to stabilize financial and credit markets and to pave the way for a gradual economic recovery. Likewise, the financial bailout of General Motors and Chrysler saved thousands of U.S. jobs and mitigated the deepening economic hardship felt in the industrial Midwest.

In most of these cases, the critique on the left is rarely that Obama has done the wrong thing or fundamentally failed. Instead, the argument goes, the Obama administration has not done enough or has proven too willing to compromise. At its most sophisticated, this critique suggests that Obama has variously failed to take sufficiently aggressive leadership, to stake out strongly liberal positions, or else yielded ground too quickly when faced with resistance on his key policy objectives. This critique has been most vociferous on the matter of the massive health care reform proposal, particularly with regard to what now seems the doomed "public option." But even here, we must remember that Obama was on the verge of enacting major health care reform prior to the Massachusetts election, a piece of legislation that would have helped millions of the uninsured, curbed negative insurance industry practices, and cut rapidly rising health care costs. What the left fails to acknowledge, or indeed celebrate, are the enormous progressive accomplishments that Obama and his administration are already achieving. This is perhaps no clearer than in the case of addressing racial and ethnic inequality in America, to which I now turn.

The Case in Black and White

As with other issues, the Obama administration has come under criticism from some segments of African American leadership, including, on some matters, elected officials such as the Congressional Black Caucus. Activist and actor Danny Glover was quoted as saying, "I think the Obama administration has followed the same playbook, to a large extent, almost verbatim, as the Bush administration. I don't see anything different." Television journalist and commentator Tavis Smiley accused Obama of a disabling "gradualism." Likewise, Congressional representatives John Conyers and Maxine Waters, among others, charged that Obama was not doing enough and suggested that too many of his advisors did not understand the needs of Black America. The criticism has a special edge to it at a time when Black unemployment is acutely high and when many believe that segments of the Black community were targeted by predatory home mortgage lending practices.

It is no surprise that Obama has defended his actions. In general, however, he rejected seeking any legislation and policies "that say I'm just helping Black folks. I'm the president of the entire United States," he said. "What I can do is make sure that I am passing laws that help all people, particularly those who are most vulnerable and most in need." And in language directly reminiscent of sociologist William Julius Wilson's call for emphasizing universal policies that would be of disproportionate benefit to the most disadvantaged, Obama said, "That, in turn, is going to help lift up the African American community."

Wilson has been a strong defender of Obama in this regard as well. He recently told Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in the *DuBois Review,* "I have listened with some irritation to critiques by Black intellectuals that his stimulus package does not address issues that affect the poor, including poor Blacks. Such critiques show how ill-informed these critics are." In particular, Wilson pointed to a series of features of the stimulus package, such as extension of unemployment benefits, health insurance coverage, a temporary increase in the earned income-tax credit, and other tax credits for low-income workers, that would benefit the poor, including the Black poor. The stimulus package also provided substantial additional funds for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly know as food stamps), $2 billion for neighborhood stabilization efforts, and nearly $4 billion in job training and workforce enhancement programs.

Obama has also signaled through the stimulus package that an important priority of his administration is education reform. And these education-related features of the stimulus are likely to be of special benefit to the poor, including poor Blacks. These features include $5 billion for a variety of early education programs, such as Head Start and Early Head Start. Moreover, the administration has made it clear it wants to encourage proven strategies for reducing disparities in achievement. This includes another $5 billion in funding intended to spur innovative projects, inspired by Geoffrey Canada's successful Harlem Children's Zone efforts, to improve education for the most disadvantaged. A critical ingredient here that sets the Obama effort apart from earlier Bush administration No Child Left Behind policy is that the aim is more than just the testing, identification of poorly performing schools, and eventual sanctioning of teachers and administrators who lag behind. The purpose of this funding, without diminishing the emphasis on performance and accountability measures, is to find intervention strategies that make a real difference in what children, especially the most disadvantaged students, get out of schooling. This all goes virtually unheralded on the griping left.

Even less heralded than the Obama administration's directly economic and health-related progressive efforts have been the changes with regard to civil rights and law enforcement. It is also too easy to forget, as the the *New York Times* pointed out in an editorial on September 2, 2009, that "[t]he Bush administration declared war on the whole idea of civil rights, in a way that no administration of either party had since the passage of the nation's civil rights law in the 1960s. It put a far-right ideologue in a top position at the civil rights division and, as the department's inspector general said in a scathing report, he screened out job applicants with civil rights sympathies." A Government Accounting Office report released in December 2009 documented reduced enforcement efforts and a major shift in priorities within the civil rights division under Bush. Obama's Attorney General Eric Holder and recently confirmed Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Tony Perez have promised a return to traditional civil rights division priorities and enforcement efforts.

Many analysts now believe that one of the most serious policy priorities of the past several decades with negative consequences for Black Americans has been the so-called war on drugs. A shift in the likelihood of arrest and formal incarceration for nonviolent, drug-related crimes is substantially responsible for the sharp rise in incarceration rates in the United States, particularly among low-income Black men. Federal policy has played an important role in this trend, especially in terms of setting a model for states, providing states with financial incentives for enhanced antidrug law enforcement efforts, as well as by directly enhancing and federalizing a number of drug-related offenses.

The Obama administration has made it clear it intends to change direction in this arena. In particular, in its appointments, policy declarations, and early actions, the Obama administration has clearly signaled a move away from a number of practices that tended to result in the unwarranted, disproportionate incarceration of African Americans. Important aspects of these efforts include a renewed priority on treatment, as opposed to incarceration, as a response to drug-related crime and direct efforts to eliminate the crack versus powder-cocaine sentencing differential.

Thus, across virtually all areas, and especially in areas affecting low-income people and racial and ethnic minorities, there is unambiguous evidence of an administration that has charted a profoundly different course from that of its predecessor. Yet the left is still disappointed with Obama. Why?

Progressive Disconnect

Obama the candidate raised high expectations for change. These expectations are much of the current problem. A good portion of Obama's first year in office was also spent in an almost completely futile effort at obtaining bipartisan support for administration initiatives. Some thought he should never have worried about seeking Republican support. I disagree with this position. He campaigned on trying to change the political culture in Washington, D.C. Obama was thus as correct in making this bipartisan effort at the outset, I believe, as he is now in judging that Republican obstructionism, at least on domestic social issues, knows no bounds of reason or decency.

In fairness, Obama tried to reign in the high expectations now plaguing him, both on election night and especially in his inaugural address. Indeed, many on the left seem to have missed entirely the tone set by Obama's inaugural speech and, for that matter, the full array of circumstances he faced by the time he actually took the oath of office. Of course, the bottom had not fallen out of the economy when the 2008 campaign season got under way (and when those lofty expectations were first put into place). The Great Recession changed all priorities and the political context in profound and far-reaching ways. Although Obama's inaugural address did return to his themes of hope, new directions, and change, it also sounded a note of sober assessment that can be summed up in one word: responsibility.

Hemmed in by almost a decade of an administration that ignored mounting crises, ranging from the federal budget, global warming, misspent American stature on the international stage (as well as by two ineptly waged wars), to a deep, urgent

Feb. 17, 2009. Aboard Air Force One, a close-up of the President's signature on the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which he had just signed in Denver. OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY PETE SOUZA

economic emergency, Obama did his best to establish a tone of more reasonable expectations and, above all else, of responsibility. As he neared the end of the speech he said, "What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility—a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character than giving our all to a difficult task. This is the price and the promise of citizenship."

Despite all of this, there are those on the left who cannot be satisfied that Obama is even seriously trying, much less actually doing enough, to chart a different policy agenda. This strikes me as politically naïve navel-gazing. The criticism of Obama and his team is misplaced. I see no signs of a politically potent left that has made the intellectual, mass popular, or grassroots case for any of the initiatives on which Obama stands accused of having let us down. For example, I do not think a savvy politician like Obama would let go of the public option in the health reform legislation if there really was an effective and mobilized constituency for it. Certainly nothing on the left that rivals the public profile or intensity of the Tea Party movement has emerged to help politically sustain a more progressive policy thrust than the one Obama has actually attempted and delivered on. When at its best, politics is the art of the possible.

Obama cannot snap his fingers and pass legislation. Some frustration with the pace and direction of change is understandable, though most of this anger should be focused on the dysfunctional nature of national politics rather than on the Obama administration. As *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson put it, "But he's a president, not a Hollywood action hero." Applying a more realistic "presidential" (rather than superhero) standard, Obama has actually been remarkably successful. A *Congressional Quarterly* study gave Obama the highest success rating in House and Senate voting achieved by any president in the past five decades (96.7%), exceeding even that of Lyndon Johnson (93%) in 1965.

If his popular approval ratings are any gauge, then most Americans are more appreciative of the challenges Obama faces and the successes he has enjoyed than are the pundits. At the end of his first year in office, the Gallup Organization reports that Obama's approval rating hovers around 50%, down from the near historic high rating of approximately 70% when he took the oath of office. Yet Obama's average approval rating for the first year of his presidency came in at 57%. This puts him ahead of Bill Clinton (49%) at this juncture and tied with that of Ronald Reagan. Given the depth of the Great Recession and the persistent acute unemployment, he arguably has, in fact, sustained an unexpectedly high level of popular approval.

Of course, a careful look makes it clear that popular assessments of the Obama presidency to this point show a real measure of polarization by race. When he took office, Gallup surveys showed that 88% of African Americans approved of the job Obama was doing as compared to 75% of Latinos and 62% of White Americans. His approval rating among Blacks remained at roughly 90% for the remainder of the year. Likewise, his approval among Latinos never fell below the high 60s and ended the year at 71%. However, his approval level among White voters fell into the mid-40s by August 2009 and has remained there ever since, ending the year at 42%.

With respect to the matter of race, and to race relations specifically, the mass perception is far more ambiguous, if not contradictory. A recent *Washington Post*-ABC News poll suggests that Americans are less optimistic today about Obama's likely impact on race relations than they were at the time of the inauguration. In January 2009, nearly six in ten Americans thought Obama's election would improve race relations. By January 2010, however, that number had slid back to only four in ten. The *Post*-ABC poll also suggested that African Americans in particular had become more pessimistic about race, returning to pre-election levels in their assessment of the amount of progress in race relations. Looking at different questions and a much wider array of issues, however, a major Pew Center survey suggests a generally more optimistic view of race issues among African Americans in the wake of Obama's ascension to the presidency.

Obama is the best hope for a progressive agenda in these times, particularly on those issues likely to be of greatest concern for African American and Latino/a voters and communities. The left needs to figure that out and direct its criticism and its efforts where it will do more good: debunking the worn-out Republican pieties of the past (i.e., cutting taxes, reducing the size of government, and always trusting in a benign, self-regulating marketplace) and mobilizing on behalf of substantive policy agendas that will make a difference. The drumbeat of nit-picking and complaints against the Obama administration just plays into a right-wing agenda of negativity, polarization, and political paralysis.

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Beyond Leveling the Playing Field

CAN THE "OBAMA EFFECT" RESHAPE GENDER EQUALITY?

BY JOAN C. WILLIAMS AND STEPHANIE BORNSTEIN

JUST NINE DAYS after being inaugurated, a newly minted President Barack Obama chose the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act as his first bill to sign into law, signaling to women's rights advocates—and detractors—that things had changed. The Act served to undo the damage done by a conservative-leaning U.S. Supreme Court, who had ruled against Ledbetter in her sex discrimination lawsuit. After nearly 20 years as an employee of the Goodyear Tire Company, Ledbetter discovered that she had been paid at a lower rate than similarly situated male coworkers throughout her career, compounding over time and resulting in extensive lost wages and benefits. When Ledbetter sued, the Court said she was too late, ruling that her 180-day statute

President Barack Obama waits in the Green Room prior to signing an Executive Order for the White House Council on Women and Girls in the East Room, 3/11/09.

OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY PETE SOUZA

of limitations for filing a discrimination complaint had started long ago, when the discriminatory pay rates were set. The Ledbetter Act amended federal law and overrode the Court's decision, stating clearly that each discriminatory paycheck received starts the statute of limitations for an employment discrimination claim anew. Thus, with a stroke of his pen, President Obama sent the message that there was a new sheriff in town when it comes to gender discrimination.

So how has Obama fared in advancing the cause of gender equality in his first year in office, and what comes next if he is serious about this commitment? Obama and his administration have actually fared quite well, although, of course, much remains to be accomplished. After signing the Ledbetter Act and appointing talented women to key roles in his administration, President Obama created two new executive-level entities, a council and a task force, both with women's economic security and work/family topics on their agendas. The administration also made progress by including funding and tax credits for childcare and Head Start within the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Even further, there is the promise of significant advancement on issues like equal pay, paid sick days, and expanded family and medical leave—basic necessities in any developed nation that are still lacking in the United States.

Yet an even greater opportunity is at stake: Obama has the opportunity to push Americans to *reshape* the playing field, not simply level it. That is, Obama can fuel the process, already under way, of replacing the outdated norm of an all-or-nothing workplace designed around an "ideal worker" with 24/7 availability and no family responsibilities with a more modern and realistic idea of a "balanced worker," who has competing demands at work and at home. For Obama to be a truly transformative figure, he must push our society toward becoming a place where being an excellent worker no longer means never seeing your children and where working a manageable schedule no longer relegates you to the margins or the "mommy track." But before we discuss where Obama might yet go, let's first review where he has so far been.

The Inaugural Year: Laying the Groundwork and First Steps

In short order after taking office, President Obama followed up his signing of the Ledbetter Act with several key actions that demonstrated his commitment to gender equality. He named women to one-third (7) of his 21 cabinet-level posts (4 of the traditional 15 cabinet positions), and appointed a woman of color to a vacancy on the U.S. Supreme Court, a woman chair of his Council of Economic Advisors, and the first-ever female solicitor general. He also established two new executive branch initiatives that offer the possibility for significant policy advancement on gender equality: the Middle Class Task Force (hereafter "Task Force"), made up of key cabinet members and staff and led by Vice President Joe Biden; and the White House Council on Women and Girls (hereafter "Council"), made up of key cabinet members and staff and led by Senior Advisor to the President Valerie Jarrett. The Task Force is described as an effort to coordinate and expedite policies and initiatives to raise the living standards of middle class working families. One of its five major stated goals in this effort is to improve work/family balance. Likewise, the Council—whose role is to coordinate federal efforts on and ensure that federal programs reflect issues affecting women and girls—includes a focus on work/family balance. Cabinet appointments and new task forces might be criticized as elevating symbol over substance; yet standing alongside the Ledbetter Act, they show a new and high-profile commitment to promoting gender equality at all levels of public and social policy.

While the new Task Force and Council have begun to consider a wide variety of issues relevant to gender equality, they have yet to do significant work on the issue of work/family balance. And if you ask most women living in the United States to name their chief struggle on a daily basis, the answer will likely be the same: the juggling act to both provide financially for and provide care for their families. Fully 95% of American women—and 90% of American men—report work/family conflict and the wish for more family time. Successfully addressing gender equality in the United States means tackling the area where the rubber meets the road for most American women (and men): conflicting demands at work and at home. The administration has done well in setting the stage for taking on this next key issue in the fight for gender equality. It is now time to seize the moment.

Next Steps: Leveling the Playing Field for Mothers and Other Caregivers

The good news is, while the tough work of achieving greater gender equality through reducing work/family conflict still lies ahead, the administration has not only laid the groundwork, but already knows what to do. In their platform as candidates, which became their administration's policy agenda—the "Obama-Biden Plan" (available to view at http://change.gov/agenda)—the president and vice president identify several key policies that if successfully addressed will greatly improve economic equality and security for women by reducing immediate work/family conflict. While the legislative landscape largely determines whether this can happen, it is plausible, maybe even likely, that there will be movement on the following key issues.

Short-Term Leaves. The administration has prioritized establishing a minimum number of paid sick days for all U.S. workers, which they can then use to care for themselves, their children, or other family members. Likewise, the Obama-Biden Plan pledged to expand the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) to provide unpaid short-term family and medical leaves to more workers for more reasons. Currently, the FMLA's provision of 12 weeks of unpaid leave covers only those employees who've worked for at least a year and at least 1,250 hours (over 24 hours a week) for an employer with 50 or more employees. And this leave can only be used to care for oneself, for a new child, or for a parent, child, or spouse with a serious health condition.

In terms of meeting American women's immediate needs, these efforts are the obvious place to start—and would begin to align the United States with the rest of the industrialized world. A dumbfounding statistic from the Project on Global Working Families is that only four countries in the world provide no paid maternity leave for new mothers: Lesotho, Papua New Guinea, Swaziland, and the United States. In terms of paid sick leave, the Project reports that while the United States requires no paid sick days, at least 145 other countries do, 136 of them providing a week or more.

Caregiver Discrimination. While paid sick days and family and medical leave are essential to protecting economic security in the short term, raising a child or caring for an elderly or ill family member is not just a short-term proposition. An ongoing threat to gender equality and the economic security of working families, especially mothers, is family responsibilities discrimination, or FRD. Also known as caregiver discrimination, FRD occurs when, despite good performance, an employee is penalized at work—for example, rejected for hire, passed over for promotion, demoted, harassed, or terminated—based on family caregiving responsibilities. Pregnant women, mothers and fathers of young children, and employees with aging parents or sick spouses or partners may encounter FRD when their employers make personnel decisions based on stereotypical notions of how they will or should act given their family responsibilities.

Studies suggest that discrimination against mothers is now the strongest form of employment discrimination. In a 2007 study published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Stanford sociologist Shelley Correll and her colleagues documented that when compared with similarly situated women without children, mothers were 79% less likely to be recommended for hire, 100% less likely to be promoted, were offered an average of $11,000 less for the same position, and were held to higher performance and punctuality standards. Given that 80% of American women become mothers by age 44, and that nearly 50% of the U.S. labor market is now made up of women, dramatic workplace discrimination against mothers is a truly serious gender equality issue.

Likewise, studies document that fathers who attempt to step out of the breadwinner role and take on more than a symbolic amount of participation in their children's care are also stiffly penalized at work. Numerous studies document that fathers who take parental leave or have even a short work absence due to family caregiving are recommended for fewer rewards, viewed as less committed, and given lower performance ratings.

Again, the Obama-Biden Plan has pledged to address this problem, by "commit[ting] the government to enforcing recently-enacted Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidelines on caregiver discrimination." While there is no express protection for "caregivers" under federal law like there are for race, religion, age, and disability, in 2007 the EEOC issued enforcement guidance detailing how many forms of caregiver discrimination are illegal as sex discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, or associational discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act (for example, if a worker is penalized for having a child or spouse with a disability). By vigorously pursuing this commitment, the Obama administration can make unprecedented strides toward solving the longer-term disadvantages that mothers (and all caregivers) face in the workplace.

And while federal law does not expressly protect private employees from employment discrimination based on family responsibilities, Executive Order 11478, as amended by EO 13152 under President Clinton, does expressly prohibit federal employees from discrimination based on "status as a parent." In its efforts to be a family-friendly model employer, the federal government should vigorously enforce and pursue this protection within its own workplaces.

Workplace Flexibility. Also key to advancing women's economic equality is the promotion of workplace flexibility, both in schedule and location, to ensure greater opportunities for women to succeed at work given competing demands at home. Once again, the Obama-Biden Plan identified this issue, pledging to create an informational program and assistance for businesses to increase flexibility, creating federal incentives for telecommuting, and making the federal government a model flexible employer.

While training programs and incentives are essential carrots for businesses, already-proposed legislation (The Working Families Flexibility Act) would go further to ensure the advancement of flexible working by establishing a "right to request" flexibility without retaliation, similar to existing policy in the United Kingdom, where any employee may request to change his or her work hours, schedule, or location. Employers are required to engage in an interactive process to discuss this request and must provide legitimate grounds for denial; employees who make such a request are protected from retaliation by their employers; and small employers (those of fewer than 15 employees) are exempted. Establishing a right to request in the United States would be a good first step to promote workplace flexibility in a way that is also not overly burdensome to employers; a 2005 report by the Center for WorkLife Law on similar policies in the U.K. showed that employers' fears of costs were generally unwarranted, as nine out of ten U.K. employers reported no significant problems with the law's implementation.

The Vision for the Future: Toward Reshaping the Playing Field

If the Obama administration simply follows its own road map, it stands to accomplish a great deal in terms of leveling the playing field for women. Of course, it remains to be seen if this will actually happen. Although the administration has sent very promising signals of commitment to the goal, it will take more than the administration's commitment to move forward. And, if there was success on this front, it would serve primarily to help women succeed in an outdated working culture based on masculine norms. President Obama and his administration also have the unique opportunity to not just level but also begin to reshape the playing field.

Breaking Down the Maternal Wall. Enforcement of the EEOC guidance on caregiver discrimination is essential. Yet while a costly lawsuit may be an effective stick against discrimi-

natory employers, it is hardly an efficient way to reduce bias against caregivers. To truly shift the norms in the workplace requires an unearthing of biases and assumptions, as well as steps to identify and break them. Though small and incremental, these might include more effective training, public education, incentives for bias prevention, and pilot programs aimed at reducing bias against caregivers. The goal—a lofty one indeed—should be to erase the often unconscious negative competence assumptions that go along with a pregnancy, leave, or move to a part-time schedule to care for young children. These events must be seen as competency-neutral scheduling and staffing issues, just like a vacation, sabbatical, or reduced schedule to pursue graduate school. The Obama administration must take proactive steps to experiment with ways of preventing mothers from being discriminated against in the first place.

Counteracting the Flexibility Stigma. Flexible work arrangements are not a new idea; despite being introduced in the early 1970s, they have only gradually gained traction. A key barrier to their success is that employees often encounter bias and marginalization when they try to work part-time or flexibly (or expect that they might). Because the common perception is that most employees who seek to work flexibly do so for family caregiving reasons, working flexibly can trigger in supervisors and employers (whether consciously or not) stereotypes like those encountered by working mothers—i.e., that an employee who works flexibly is less reliable, competent, committed to the job, ambitious, or suitable for promotion. The opportunity here is to encourage workplace flexibility while acknowledging and combating the biases in our culture that go along with *actually using* them—again, to encourage reason-neutral flexibility, so that men and women are actively adopting flexible and reduced schedules for a variety of reasons, without fear of career penalties. The reality, especially in this economy, is that no matter how generous an employer's flexibility policies, employees will not take advantage of them if they do so at their own peril.

The administration is already vigorously pursuing legislation that stands to help this goal enormously: health care reform. A major driver behind American employers' preference to have one employee work 60 hours a week instead of two employees working 30 hours each is the additional cost of providing health care benefits to a second employee. If the administration is able to reach its goal of passing health care reform, then achieving meaningful cost control may help weaken this preference. Another important step will be to remove additional economic penalties to part-time work and establish part-time parity in the United States (which would also help reduce the pay gap between women and men in this country). In this way, women and men who work a reduced-hours schedule will receive proportionately the same pay and benefits as those who work full time.

Making the Business Case, Even Amid the Great Recession. No doubt, the largest obstacle to implementing any new policies that reduce work/family conflict and increase gender equality will be the fear of imposing additional burdens on U.S. employers at this critical juncture in our economy. While the stakes may be more extreme, this is by no means a new argument; business groups have opposed every minimum labor standard throughout time, from the eight-hour workday to the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993. But times and public opinion changed, and these laws were passed—and U.S. businesses survived (and even prospered).

Countless studies show real economic benefits to instituting policies that prevent bias and better align the structure of the workplace to the reality of its workforce. Among these benefits are (1) increased productivity, worker attachment and engagement, and size of the talent pool; and (2) reduced unplanned absenteeism, turnover and related recruiting and training costs, stress and overwork-related health care costs, and legal liability for discrimination. Rather than causing policymakers to shy away from change for fear of doing anything to upset employers, the current economic crisis could provide the opportunity to use this data to educate employers about how reducing workplace/workforce mismatch is good for the bottom line and the economy as a whole. And as tough as times are now, the recession is not going to last forever; when the economy picks up, those employers who have embraced flexibility, in downsizing and in general, will be better positioned to flex their workforce back up and to attract and retain top talent while doing so.

President Obama is a most unusual leader at a most unusual time. The appointments are in place, the Task Force and Council have both been established, and the hard work of health care reform is approaching fruition. The time is ripe not only to put in place minimum labor standards like short-term leaves and reduced caregiver discrimination, but also to begin unearthing gendered assumptions about how we do work in the United States. It is time to focus on productivity, performance, and talent rather than schedule and face-time. Not only does doing so have the potential to save businesses money, reduce overwork, and increase employment rates, but it offers the promise of achieving real, meaningful gender equality for both women and men at work and at home.

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WITHIN REACH

Reducing LGBT Inequality in the Age of Obama

BY PATRICK J. EGAN

Shortly after the inauguration of Barack Obama, in conversations, over emails, and in blog posts, a question rippled forth among those who care deeply about the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) Americans: "Have you seen the new White House webpage?" For there, just a few links away from www.whitehouse.gov, can be found explicit promises from the president of the United States to expand the rights of LGBT people. Obama's stated goals include the expansion of federal employment protections to outlaw workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, civil unions and full federal rights for same-sex couples, a repeal of the policy forbidding gays and lesbians who serve in the armed forces to be open about their sexual orientation, and adoption rights for all people, straight or gay.

Symbolically and substantively, the change was nothing short of remarkable. Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush, had run as a "compassionate conservative" and made a point of welcoming gay and lesbian donors to a public meeting at his ranch during his 2000 campaign for president. But his eight years in office were marked by consistent blocking of any sort of moves toward LGBT equality. The low point came in 2004, when he capitulated to social conservatives and called for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution to ban same-sex marriage. The election of Obama, who in 2007 described gay rights as an issue nothing short of "whether this nation is going to live up to its founding promise of equality by treating all its citizens with dignity and respect," was viewed by many as the dawn of a new era of progress toward full equality for America's LGBT population. And given that gay rights victories rarely occur at any level of government unless Democrats control both the executive and legislative branches, the Obama presidency (in combination with large Democratic majorities in the Senate and House) gave LGBT Americans their best hopes for change in nearly two decades.

How America's LGBTs Experience Inequality

What, exactly, do LGBTs hope that government can do for them? At first blush, the amelioration of LGBT inequality might seem to lie in the realm of culture rather than in the domain of government. But many of the ways that LGBTs experience inequality have much to do with government activity, including the job and housing markets, crime, schools, and the legal system's treatment of same-sex couples. Using a national probability sample, psychologist Gregory Herek found that one out of every six lesbians and gay men has experienced job or housing discrimination in their adult lifetimes. (Firing someone for being gay is currently legal in 29 out of 50 states.) Violence is a grave problem, particularly for gay men. One in four gay men reports having been hit, beaten, physically attacked, or sexually assaulted at some point in their lives for being gay, and more than one-third say they have been threatened with such violence. Bigotry starts early; in a population survey of the nation's teens conducted by Harris Interactive for the advocacy group GLSEN in 2005, one-third of all teens said students in their schools were often harassed because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation—a harassment rate far greater than that associated with race, ethnicity, religion, or economic class. It's no wonder that 22 percent of LGBT students reported feeling unsafe at their schools, compared to 7 percent of non-LGBT students. Gay couples typically face much higher costs than married straight couples due to differential treatment by tax laws, insurance rules, and other regulations. Perhaps no greater indignity is faced by same-sex couples than in a health crisis, when gays and lesbians routinely find themselves with no legal rights to visit their partners in the hospital, make medical decisions, or—in the case of death—even claim their loved one's body for proper burial. A surviving partner has no claim on the deceased's Social Security benefits and typically must pay taxes on any of his or her partner's assets.

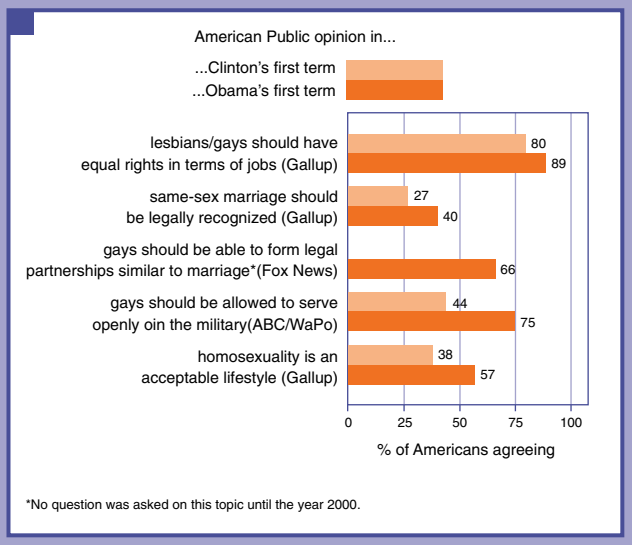
A good way to figure out what equality means to LGBT Americans is to ask them. That's what my colleagues Murray Edelman, Kenneth Sherrill, and I did in a first-ever academic survey of the political behaviors and attitudes of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals conducted using a representative national sample in 2007. Our respondents rated three goals as most important for the gay rights movement: protection against workplace discrimination, laws against hate crimes, and benefits for same-sex couples, such as Social Security survivors' benefits, pensions, and family medical leave. Not far behind were parental and adoption rights. Much lower on the scale were the two gay rights issues that have been found most in the headlines of late: legal marriage and ending the military ban. The survey results suggest that most gays and lesbians would be happy with a practical approach that focuses on winning tangible protections and benefits that would address the inequalities described above. But when we divided our sample by age, we found that by far the most urgent priority for the youngest group (those aged 18–25) is achieving the right to civil marriage. The finding is inspiring because it indicates that those who are just coming out expect nothing less than full equality. But it also suggests that the newest generation—those with the most passion for activism and politics—may be impatient with a pragmatic strategy.

From Jubilation to Disillusion

A year after Obama's inauguration, the mood among LGBT advocates is decidedly less elated than it was in January 2009. Part of the problem is symbolic; the lyrical Obama and his skilled political team have proven surprisingly flat-footed regarding LGBT issues on several occasions. There was the invitation of megapastor Rick Warren—who explicitly prohibits gays and lesbians from becoming members of his Saddleback Church and has compared same-sex marriage to incest and bestiality—to give the invocation at Obama's inauguration. There was the legal brief filed last June by the federal government in a constitutional lawsuit over the Defense of Marriage Act (or DOMA), which eerily compared the legal recognition of same-sex relationships to—yes—the legal recognition of incestuous ones. More generally, there is the curious disconnect between the rhetoric of a man whose very being would seem to

National Equality March in Washington, DC, on October 11, 2009. BY JASON PIER PHOTOGRAPHY @ WWW.JASONPIER.COM

FIGURE 1. **What a difference 16 years makes: Public opinion on gay issues at the beginning of two Democratic presidencies**



symbolize equality and his stated discomfort with legalizing civil marriage for same-sex couples. "I believe that marriage is between a man and a woman," Obama has replied on several occasions when asked for his opinion on the topic. The veracity of this claim seems doubtful to many; survey data indicate that same-sex marriage is favored by an overwhelming 72 percent of liberal Democrats with a post-graduate education—which, presumably, describes virtually everyone working in the Obama administration. More likely, Obama and his team have decided that voicing full-fledged support for same-sex marriage has too many political downsides.

Obama could be forgiven both the symbolic missteps and the reticence toward a full-throated embrace of gay marriage if he and the Democrats were demonstratively moving forward on a substantial number of the other promises made by the party to the LGBT community. But progress has been slow. For instance, some version of an employment discrimination bill has been introduced in nearly every session of Congress since 1974. The proposal has been the subject of no fewer than six hearings and two floor votes. But the bill's reintroduction in 2009 (now with 45 Senate and 198 House cosponsors, and incorporating protections for gender identity as well as sexual orientation) was met with even more hearings, and no explicit promise about when—or if—either chamber would vote on the measure. Another example is military service. The government's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, which requires that gay and lesbian military personnel who are open about their sexual orientation be discharged from service, has resulted in the dismissals of more than 14,000 members of the armed forces since its enactment by a law signed by Clinton in 1993. The policy makes life very difficult for those who do serve, as they can live in constant fear of officially authorized investigations into their private lives. In 2009, a bill that would end the policy was introduced in the House by Gulf War veteran Rep. Patrick Murphy (D-PA), but no further action has been taken. Meanwhile, dismissals of openly gay and lesbian military personnel have continued since Obama's taking office.

There have been bright spots. In June 2009, Obama signed an administrative memorandum granting some federal benefits to the partners of gay government employees. (Even here, there was disillusion; the list of benefits did not include health insurance, the extension of which the administration claimed was forbidden by DOMA.) A long-awaited goal was realized in October 2009, when Obama signed a law providing federal support for state and local prosecutions of hate crimes, including those committed on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. And this February, the administration finally lent substance to its promise to end the ban on military service with impressive and unequivocal Congressional testimony in favor of ending the ban by Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Pentagon is undertaking a year-long study about how to best implement the change, which would have to be approved by Congress. Defense Secretary Robert Gates has signaled that in the meantime, the current policy will be carried out more fairly—perhaps with a reduction in investigations instigated by third-party disclosures of sexual orientation.

The Ghosts of Backlashes Past

On the whole, the first year of Obama's presidency did not yield the breakthroughs hoped for by LGBT advocates. Exit polls indicate that LGBs typically give three-quarters of their votes to Democratic candidates. Why have Democrats been slow to enact changes so critical to such a loyal voting block? The experience of the last Democratic president looms large; Bill Clinton's election in 1993 was similarly greeted with elation by the LGBT movement. But the tortuous logic of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was the result of a chain of events that ensued after the military's top brass resisted Clinton's plan to fulfill his campaign pledge to remove the ban on gays serving in the armed forces. A few years later, a Republican-controlled Congress forced Clinton's hand in passing DOMA just weeks before Election Day 1996, leaving him to either veto legislation that opinion polls showed was overwhelmingly popular or sign the law. By driving a wedge between Clinton's base of liberal voters and the more moderate views of the broader public, both of these issues proved unpleasant political experiences for Democratic elected officials. Lesson learned: There is much to be lost, and little gained, from grappling with LGBT issues.

A casual observer of American politics might conclude that LGBT issues are still politically dangerous, given recent events like the passage of California's Proposition 8, the rejection by Maine voters of that state's same-sex marriage law, and the New Jersey and New York state legislatures' failures to pass same-sex marriage. But this would focus undue attention on the gay rights goal—marriage—for which there is currently the least amount of support among Americans. By contrast, a review of survey data indicates that public opinion is largely supportive of a broad range of gay rights goals and that it has become substantially more so since the Clinton era. Figure 1 shows the difference in

opinion on several prominent aspects of the gay rights debate in Clinton's first term compared to that in Obama's first term (to the best extent possible given data availability). In every respect, opinion has moved substantially toward acceptance and equality. Support for employment rights for lesbians and gays, already strong when Clinton took office, is now nearly universal. Public approval of gays serving openly in the military jumped from 44 percent in May 1993 to 75 percent in July 2008. And on the marquee issue of same-sex marriage, opinion has also moved in a supportive direction, although it still falls short of a majority. But what has gone largely unnoticed is that a policy that didn't even exist in 1993—the notion that legal recognitions similar to, but not called, marriage be extended to same-sex couples—is now supported by two-thirds of the public. More generally, Americans are increasingly willing to agree that homosexuality is an "acceptable alternative lifestyle," even as the hand-wringing implied by this phrase makes it sound ever more passé. Moreover, younger voters just entering the electorate are much more supportive than those whom they replace, indicating that these trends are likely to continue.

It is clear that many of the most important goals of the LGBT movement enjoy a broad level of acceptance among the American public. Why, then, are Obama and the Democrats dragging their feet? The answer to this question has many components that will be familiar to those who study American politics: the strong bias toward the status quo found in American political institutions, the series of obstacles created by the patchwork U.S. federal system, and the lack of leverage a group can have with elected officials when, like LGBTs, it is too strongly aligned with—or "captured" by—one of the two major political parties. But there are some aspects of the politics of gay rights in the United States that are unusual; at all levels of government, public policy has been slow to reflect the steady rise in the public's support for LGBT rights. While in some ways the battle over gay rights resembles other intergroup conflicts, the case of LGBTs is nevertheless atypical because a large share of the group won't disclose their group identity and thus remains hidden from view. And then there is the fact that marriage has in some sense peaked too early as *the* salient gay-rights issue. This is due in part to America's uniquely powerful and decentralized court system, which heard and ruled upon cases regarding same-sex marriage well in advance of any decisive change in public opinion.

The Road Forward

Laid side by side, opinion data from the American public and from gay people themselves point Obama, the Democrats, and advocates for LGBT equality in a clear direction. A range of policies benefiting LGBT Americans can be achieved with the support of a strong majority of the public. Obama, the Democrats, and the handful of pro-gay Republicans still remaining in Congress can move forward on passing the Employment Non-Discrimination Act; they can stop the purge of lesbian and gay servicemembers from the armed forces; and they can change—up, at least, until the threshold allowed by DOMA—laws and regulations governing how same-sex couples fare under the Social Security system and the nation's tax laws. This can all be accomplished at much less political cost than in the 1990s, thereby banishing the ghosts of backlashes past.

For their part, LGBT leaders can make it clear to their constituents that these policy changes would be substantial victories—and, in fact, inform them that these changes are needed. One disheartening finding from our survey was that while almost every respondent could correctly identify whether same-sex marriage was legal in his or her state, an astounding 41 percent of LGBs were unaware that no federal law exists prohibiting employment discrimination. At the state level, the LGBT movement can also pick battles more wisely with regard to marriage and civil unions. The first wave of litigation in state courts over marriage notched important victories. But more crucially, it created the entire notion of civil unions, which probably wouldn't exist were it not for the Vermont Supreme Court's decision requiring them in 1999. For now, the LGBT movement should avoid costly and unsuccessful fights over marriage in states where legislation or court decisions can be put to a statewide vote (as in Maine, where a same-sex marriage law was rejected by voters on November 3, 2009). Instead, the movement could focus on winning legal partnerships that entail marriage in substance, if not in name (such as Washington's "everything but marriage" law approved by that state's voters on the same day). As these partnership laws become enacted, the courts can then be used to give them real teeth. This approach would yield a second-best outcome for sure, but one that creates the tangible benefits and protections for same-sex couples that lesbians and gays tend to think are more important than the label "marriage." And unlike marriage, this goal is currently politically viable; after all, two-thirds of Americans support the idea. In time—as attitudes continue to change and the notion of extending legal recognition to same-sex couples seems less audacious—legal marriage will become available to lesbians and gays nationwide.

Barack Obama came to office amid a wave of change in opinions toward supporting LGBT rights. This change has been decades in the making and persists despite high-profile setbacks. While the Obama era has yet to yield the substantial policy victories desired by LGBTs, America's vastly improved political landscape regarding gay rights means that these goals can be more than just promises on a White House website. They are now politically feasible. Many of the real changes for which LGBTs have long waited—and that Obama and the Democrats know in their hearts and minds are a simple matter of fairness and dignity—are firmly within reach.

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SPOTLIGHT ON...

Building Educated Leaders for Life

BY KENDRA BISCHOFF

The accountability movement among educational policymakers has primarily focused on raising student achievement within the confines of the traditional school day and the nine-month school year. The movement is about recruiting and training better teachers, upgrading standards in the classroom, and otherwise improving education during the school year. But what about the more than two months students spend out of school on summer vacation? Shouldn't we worry about whether learning is occurring then too? Shouldn't we be concerned that richer children get to attend high-quality camps and learn from resource-rich parents while less fortunate children are left to stagnate?

Indeed, we should. There's a growing body of research showing that while high-income children continue to learn during the summer, their low-income counterparts progress more slowly and sometimes even regress academically during the summer months. Thus, the gap between rich and poor children worsens, often quite dramatically, while school is not in session.

At the same time, such evidence also presents an opportunity to make lasting change, as it highlights where (and to some extent even how) inequality is generated. The Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL) program has seized this opportunity.

Founded in 1992 by Harvard Law School students, BELL runs a structured, academically focused summer learning program for low-income and largely minority students in kindergarten through the eighth grade. In addition, they operate after-school tutoring programs in public schools, largely funded by Supplemental Education Services available for underperforming schools through the No Child Left Behind legislation. The organization, which began in Boston and served only a few hundred students in its first year, has served over 35,000 participants to date and has expanded to 70 different sites in New York, Baltimore, Detroit, Charlotte, NC, and Springfield, MA.

Tiffany Cooper Gueye, the CEO of BELL since 2008, recently spoke to us about the organization's philosophy, goals, and future plans. As a college student in Boston in 1998, Gueye was drawn to a simple BELL advertisement in a local newspaper asking potential hires, "Do you believe all children can excel?" This question piqued her interest; she signed up immediately as a teaching assistant and has worked for BELL in various capacities ever since.

What makes BELL different? There are, after all, a great many out-of-school-time (OST) programs that aim to raise academic achievement. The BELL programs differ from the run-of-the-mill OST program in three simple ways:

Research-based. Gueye, who holds a Ph.D. in Education Research, Measurement, and Evaluation, brings with her a commitment to high academic standards and strong accountability. The BELL program stands or falls on the results it generates. In deciding how to formulate its programs, BELL thus looks to high-quality research on what works and what doesn't, and the program is also fine-tuned every year based on BELL's internal data collection.

Comprehensive. The results coming out of the Harlem Children's Zone and elsewhere make it clear that progress is most reliably made when academic achievement is not addressed in isolation from other problems a child may be facing. The goals, then, of the BELL program are not just to raise academic achievement in math and reading, but also to improve self-esteem, to develop social skills, to increase parental involvement in school, and more generally to treat students not just as students but as whole persons.

Taking control. Embedded in BELL's philosophy is a belief that children are agents of change, responsible for their own actions and behavior. For example, students are referred to as scholars, a label that treats them from the start as autonomous, independent, and in control. As Gueye stated, BELL teaches children that "smart is not something you are, it's something you get."

A typical day for a BELL summer scholar begins with breakfast at 8:30 a.m. and is followed by community time when the students share their goals for the day. The remainder of the morning is filled with three hours of instruction in literacy and math. The curriculum is tailored for each child and is differentiated within classrooms using teaching assistants. In the afternoons, scholars rotate through three hours of structured enrichment activities in art, science, or physical education. They end the day with 30 minutes to gather and organize their homework materials. Fridays are reserved for guest speakers from the local community, as well as afternoon field trips.

ABOVE: BELL scholars pose for a group photo
FACING PAGE: A BELL staff member reads with a young BELL scholar

In concert with the program's goals, scholars' parents are encouraged to be heavily involved and to attend BELL-sponsored life skills workshops. BELL realizes that they may only see any given child for one summer or one school year, so they try to give parents and children the opportunity to develop skills that they can take with them as they move forward through life.

But what about results? Does being a BELL scholar indeed help close the achievement gap? In the early 2000s, Gueye teamed up with the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan policy group in Washington, D.C., to conduct a study of the effects of their six-week summer program. Because the summer program was oversubscribed and did not have the capacity or funding to serve all applicants, they were able to randomly select participants in 2005. This allowed them to convincingly isolate the true causal effects of their program, net of family background or other unobserved characteristics that may also affect a student's academic achievement or self-concept. The results of the study showed that BELL participants gained about a month more of reading comprehension than similar students who did not participate in the program.

As a follow-up to the Urban Institute study, Gueye is now planning a corollary study of BELL's after-school program. While middle- and upper-income families often fill their children's summer and weekend time with enriching activities, low-income children are less likely to be exposed to out-of-school complements to their education. Will BELL's after-school program prove as successful as its summer program in helping close the achievement gap? We'll soon find out.

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More Than "A is for Alligator"

How to Ensure Early Childhood Systems Help Break the Cycle of Poverty

BY LISA GUERNSEY

Early childhood programs have become Exhibit A in conventional accounts of how to eradicate inequality and poverty. Advocates for early childhood programs, most notably Head Start, routinely argue that such programs help children enter school ready to learn, increasing their likelihood of academic success and reducing the chances that they remain poor in adulthood.

But today's classroom realities make this difficult to realize. If disadvantaged kids are going to achieve in school and life, classrooms must be more than play spaces staffed with babysitters. Nor should children be subjected to sit-in-your-seats, miniaturized versions of school. Instead, the programs they attend must be high quality and developmentally appropriate—maddeningly difficult characteristics to define, let alone achieve.

Let me set the stage by comparing two hypothetical classrooms for four-year-olds.

Enter Classroom One. The teacher starts with the standard "circle time" in which the children gather in a circle on the rug. She reads the children a picture book about alligators, then dismisses them to tables where they receive photocopied sheets showing an alligator next to the letter A. While the kids select their crayons, she asks them to repeat after her: "A, ah, alligator. A, ah, alligator." They answer back and begin coloring as if on autopilot: scribble, grab a new crayon, scribble, repeat.

Now enter Classroom Two. The teacher reads a book about alligators, takes a brief moment to point to the word "alligator," and notes that it starts with "A." She then asks the children what they know about alligators. One child mentions their sharp teeth, and the teacher probes, "Why do you think they have such sharp teeth?"

One child answers, "To eat!"

"Ah," the teacher says with a twinkle in her eye, "What do they eat, anyway? Spaghetti?"

"No!" the kids scream back.

After introducing the word "predator," the teacher passes around photographs of alligators and their prey. She asks the kids to stand up and stretch their arms out, raising one high and one low then snapping them together. The kids giggle as they pretend to chomp one another. Later, they measure whether an alligator is big enough to cover their circle-time rug. As they unravel a piece of string cut to an alligator's average length, the children exclaim, "Alligators are huge!"

Even without the benefit of decades of developmental research, the reader can spot the advantages of Classroom Two. In this classroom, the teacher is able to move beyond the simple didactic lesson that "A" stands for alligator. By engaging the students in fun, developmentally appropriate activities and discussions, she is able to get the students not just thinking about the letter "A," but also about such abstract concepts as size, about the meaning of the word "predator," and maybe even a bit about the concept of ecosystem. But this lesson is not just better on its face. Reading research, for example, shows that children will have a much easier time learning to read and, more importantly, *comprehending* what they read, when they already have a base of vocabulary and content knowledge to lean on. It's pretty hard for an elementary school student to understand a passage about predators if he has never even heard the word "predator" before and doesn't know what one is. Years of cognitive science show the importance of giving a child early and repeated interactions with words and concepts, enabling them to become part of a child's long-term memory so that the brain can easily call upon those memories when introduced to something new.

Sadly, Classroom Two is not the norm in today's early childhood programs for disadvantaged children. This is true whether children are in Head Start programs, state-funded pre-K, subsidized child care, or parent-funded preschool. Studies of programs around the country have shown that while teachers typically provide a warm and emotionally supportive climate, the quality of what they teach—and how it's taught—is mediocre at best.

We must address this disconnect between our high expectations for early childhood programs and the reality of what children are experiencing if we want to help poor children escape poverty. It's time for a change in mindset. For years, children have been treated to a social services model that emphasizes health, safety, socialization, and nutrition. The end result: Safe and nutritious holding tanks. This is obviously not good enough. Early childhood classrooms need to have the look and feel of the alligator lesson provided by the teacher in Classroom Two, with interactions that help develop children's language, cognitive, and social skills. Although these programs should, of course, remain tightly coordinated with social services, our expectations can't end there. After all, if early education programs are going to enable poor children to compete with more affluent children, they must do *more*, not less, to level the playing field. A true anti-poverty system of education must start as soon as women are pregnant and continue until children are reading proficiently and are armed with the skills needed to learn on their own.

For the remainder of this article, I will outline how we might get there. A progressive and proactive early education system for disadvantaged children should be built around two essential principles: 1) the use of pedagogy that promotes cognitive development, expanding children's use of language and providing a solid base of content knowledge, and 2) a seamless continuity of services—starting at birth and extending through the third grade—that buttresses learning and development.

This will take money. But some new investments are on the horizon. Despite the recession, most states with pre-K programs have so far avoided devastating cuts. A recent report from the advocacy group Pre-K Now showed that pre-K funding ticked up by 1 percent in the 2010 fiscal year. A one-time infusion of funding from the stimulus bill is now making its way to Head Start and child care centers, with enough funding to bring 55,000 additional families into Early Head Start, a program for babies, toddlers, and their mothers. A $750 million fund to support home-visitation programs for new mothers and their babies will probably be passed as part of health care reform, if and when

that becomes law. And legislation currently moving through Congress as part of the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act would provide an additional $1-billion-a-year for an Early Learning Challenge Fund to help coordinate and improve the quality of early childhood programs.

It would be a mistake to assume that more money and attention are magic bullets that make early education work for low-income youth. It is not as if children's readiness for school—and therefore their chances at academic and career success—will get an automatic lift once the fairy dust of more federal and state funding is sprinkled across the existing system. "This isn't just about keeping an eye on our children," President Obama said in a major education speech in March 2009. "It's about educating them." In asking how we might do just that, let's recap how we wound up with the present early childhood system.

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The Existing Landscape

The federal government started focusing on early childhood programs for poor children during President Johnson's War on Poverty, launching Head Start in 1965. The program provides free preschool to children in families at or below the federal poverty line. Approximately 920,000 three- and four-year-olds attend, and waiting lists are common in many cities. But while child advocates have always applauded Head Start, until recently there's been little proof that Head Start children make larger gains in their social and cognitive development than those who do not attend. So in 1998, Congress authorized a study comparing Head Start children with those who, though they were qualified, did not get into the program. The study analyzed how children are doing one year after Head Start as well as after kindergarten and first grade. It found that the Head Start children were more prepared for kindergarten than the control group, scoring higher on some, though not all, indicators of cognitive and social-emotional development. But it also found that by the end of first grade, there was little difference between the two groups.

These results have given pause to some policymakers who want more evidence that taxpayer dollars are being put to good use. Even the modest gains in kindergarten readiness have provided ammunition to some who believe that the government shouldn't be spending money on early learning experiences that they believe families should provide on their own. In 1998 and 2007, new laws were passed with the objective of increasing the number of Head Start teachers with post-secondary degrees. Over the same period, the program struggled with flat funding during the Bush administrations, receiving around $6.8 billion a year over the past several years. In 2009, the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act provided $2 billion in extra Head Start funds, and the fiscal year 2010 appropriations bills currently in Congress would also boost Head Start funding. Many advocates and researchers argue that the current levels of funding are inadequate, given that demand for Head Start programs is unmet, many programs are only half-day, many teachers and staff are poorly paid, and the newfound interest in generating (and documenting) cognitive and academic gains requires new investments.

Meanwhile, from the early- to mid-2000s, states launched their own sets of programs for preschoolers, most of which focused on getting them ready for school. Thirty-eight states now have what is called "state-funded pre-K" that provides a free half or full day of instruction in public schools or community-based centers. These programs vary greatly, but many serve families with incomes significantly higher than the poverty threshold, and some are available to every child, regardless of family income. Today, state pre-K programs serve more than 1.1 million children, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research.

The combination of Head Start, state-funded pre-K, and other subsidized child care centers has led to a system characterized by a hodgepodge of disconnected services. And the system is still far from being universal. Only about four-fifths of four-year-olds are in some kind of regular child care arrangement, according to the Census Bureau, and of those, it's unclear how many offer much more than babysitting. It has only been over the past few years that leaders of state pre-K and Head Start programs started to seriously consider integrating their services. Recently, advocates of child care subsidies have voiced a call for better coordination and quality of child care services as well. High-quality child care can become an important element of early education by providing wrap around services helping parents whose jobs do not allow them to pick up children at 3 or 4 p.m., when many full-day pre-K programs end.

The Way Forward

Even if Head Start, state-funded pre-K, and child care services were better connected, there is obviously no guarantee that they would provide anything like the experiences offered by Classroom Two. To the chagrin of many child development experts, children seem to be more likely to receive something like the thinner learning experience offered by Classroom One. Preliteracy instruction in preschool is important, but introducing children to letters and print is only one component of preparing children to read. We need a system based on the principles of cognitive development and seamless integration. If these two reforms were taken truly seriously, early education could become a real poverty-killer.

Improving Pedagogy

Research from leading reading experts has shown that children need frequent oral language interactions, coupled with frequent introduction to new vocabulary words, if they are going to have any luck in comprehending the books they'll be asked to read by second, third, and fourth grades.

To deliver something like that second alligator lesson, a teacher needs to be equipped with a rich knowledge base, a strong command of vocabulary and language, and a sound understanding of child development. The successful teacher will often, though not always, have a bachelor's degree and will receive training on how to engage children based on new findings in cognitive and social science.

Poor children do exceedingly well if they are fortunate enough to attend centers with such well-prepared teachers. High-profile studies have found that these children need fewer special education services, do better in school, and engage in less crime (as indexed by crime records), all of which lead to reduced costs to society. A 40-year study of the Perry HighScope program in Ypsilanti, Michigan, revealed that it delivered $8.74 in benefits for every dollar spent. A similar study showed that the Child-Parent Centers in Chicago returned $10 for every dollar spent. For the Abecedarian program in North Carolina, the return was $3.78. All of these programs provided the high-quality, well-prepared teachers necessary for leading the exciting lessons offered in our hypothetical Classroom Two.

In Head Start, analyses of data from the Congress-commissioned Impact Study show returns in line with or slightly greater than $1 for every dollar invested. Similar data does not exist for many state pre-K programs, and though some have shown that children arrive in kindergarten better prepared, quality varies greatly across the nation. A 2005 study of pre-K programs across 11 states showed classrooms to be, on average, of low-to-moderate quality. Researchers scored interactions between teachers and children, finding them to be in the mid-range for quality. And when it came to "instructional climate"—a measure of the quantity and quality of concepts taught, as well as how teachers provided feedback to spur more learning—scores dwelled around 2, the lower end of the 1-to-7 scale that researchers used.

And so we arrive at one of the hardest nuts to crack in early childhood policy: How do we improve this "instructional climate"? First, education schools and teacher preparation programs will need to greatly expand and improve their offerings, and policymakers must reward programs that hire teachers with strong content knowledge, language skills, and the know-how to introduce new concepts in ways that recognize children's stages of development.

Recruiting and retaining these teachers and caregivers are major challenges. The average salary of a Head Start teacher with a bachelor's degree is about $27,000 a year. It's no wonder that young adults with B.A. degrees decide to work in the elementary grades instead of in pre-K programs. To recruit better teachers, early learning centers will have to pay them what they would receive in the public schools. And yet only a handful of places—such as the state of Oklahoma and some districts in New Jersey—have mustered the political will (in Oklahoma's case) or the legal authority (as in the New Jersey Supreme Court's Abbott decision) to increase funding to that level. It's worth noting that a high-quality, random-assignment study of pre-K in Tulsa, Oklahoma, showed quite staggering improvements in children's outcomes under its enriched program. There is good reason to believe that focusing on improved teaching could deliver much bang for the taxpayer's buck.

We need a system based on the principles of cognitive development and seamless integration. If these two reforms were taken truly seriously, early education could become a real poverty-killer.

A Seamless System

But we get only halfway to a high-quality early education system by ramping up teaching. The history of Head Start gives us yet another lesson: Starting children at age four is starting too late. Science has shown how much an unhealthy environment can negatively affect children's development, even in the

womb. That's why in 1995, Early Head Start was established to provide support services to pregnant women and their babies, up to age three.

By the same token, halting interventions at age five is stopping too soon. When children move from high-quality learning environments to low-performing elementary schools, research shows that the pace of their social and cognitive development starts to slow. "It is magical thinking to expect that if we intervene in the early years, no further help will be needed by children in the elementary school years and beyond," wrote Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, a prominent psychologist at Columbia University, in a widely cited paper on early childhood education.

The good news is that experts in the field, including some federal policymakers, understand this. The new vision is to create a "birth-to-eight" network—a system of interlocking intervention services that build on existing programs serving pregnant women, babies, toddlers, preschool-age children, and elementary school students. This network will require data systems that share information on children's well-being and prior experiences, connecting them seamlessly to databases in public schools. It will force funding streams to be blended and eligibility parameters to be consistent across programs. It will require intense coordination between health departments and education departments—at both the state and local level—as well as between nonprofit organizations and public school systems. These requirements may seem daunting, but in fact we are already moving, if fitfully, toward just such a system.

The Obama administration has proposed a new competitive grant program that would reward states that have already taken steps to build these networks or that show a commitment to doing so. Called the Early Learning Challenge Fund, the program is part of a larger bill, the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act, that has been passed by the House and is expected to be taken up by the Senate this winter. It would distribute $1 billion a year to help states increase the number of disadvantaged children in high-quality early care and education programs, from birth to age five. An emphasis on high-quality environments pervades the legislation's language.

A remaining step—one that has not been fully articulated in many policies and needs more attention—is to stretch that quality network further into the primary grades. Studies by Robert C. Pianta, Dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, show that elementary classrooms lack quality interactions as much as those for three- and four-year-olds. Research points to the need for what is called "the PreK-3rd approach," a strategy that provides high-quality early learning opportunities to every child before they arrive in kindergarten; that aligns standards, curricula, and assessments between the public schools and pre-K settings; and that provides continuous professional development and shared learning opportunities to well-qualified teachers. Paying pre-K teachers wages that are comparable to elementary school teachers would help ensure that all of these teachers feel like the critical professionals they are.

Early Education from A to Z

This vision for early childhood intervention goes far beyond giving four-year-olds nutritious snacks and helping them identify the letters of the alphabet. It will not be easy. But if we could deliver a high-quality birth-to-eight system, just think about the potential for reducing poverty.

Imagine, for example, what might happen to a baby boy born to a mother who is poor, depressed, and on her own. She lives in a rough neighborhood. She is struggling to make ends meet. But now she receives free visits from a nurse who gives her tips on keeping her boy healthy and on controlling her temper on days when she's overwhelmed. She enrolls in Early Head Start. When her son turns three—full of "why" questions and fascinated by animals—he starts attending a high-quality pre-K/Head Start center, where he encounters Classroom Two's alligator lesson. In kindergarten, he receives the same caliber of instruction, and again in first grade, and again in second—each year building seamlessly on what he has learned the year before.

The little boy thrives. By third grade, he is reading chapter books and writing papers on veterinary science. His mother remains poor, struggling with family conflicts and on-and-off-again employment, but the boy's educational background has put him on a path toward college. By the time he is an adult, he will escape poverty. Not only that, but most of his neighborhood friends—all immersed in the same rich learning experiences from the day they were born—will too.

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